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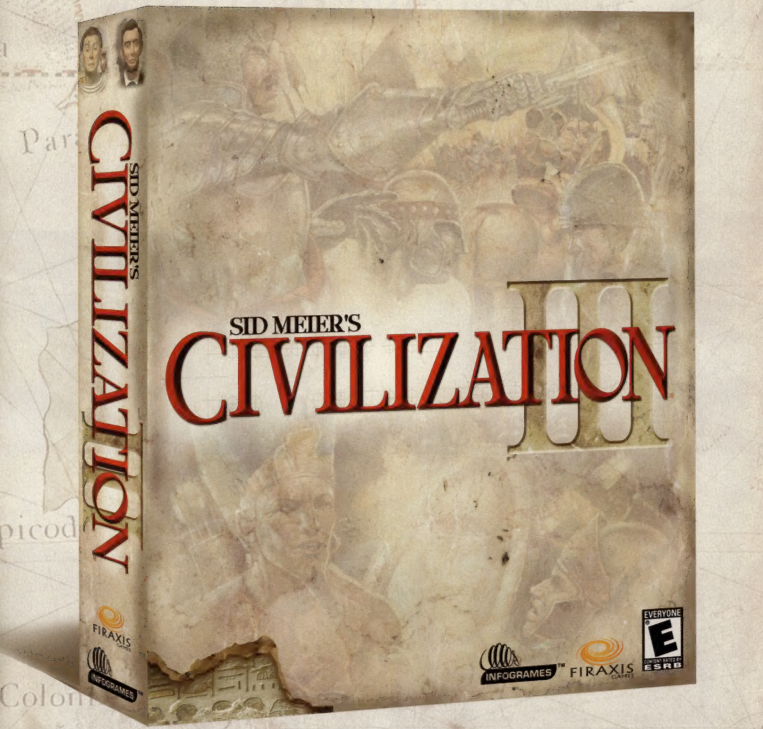

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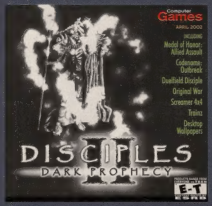

Disciples II: Dark Prophecy

This sequel offers up even more turn-based fantasy strategy, stunning artwork, and excellent gameplay. Also this month: Medal of Honor: Allied Assault, Codename: Outbreak, Original War, Screamer 4x4, Duelfield Disciple, Trainz, and more desktop wallpaper.

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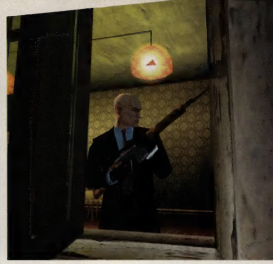

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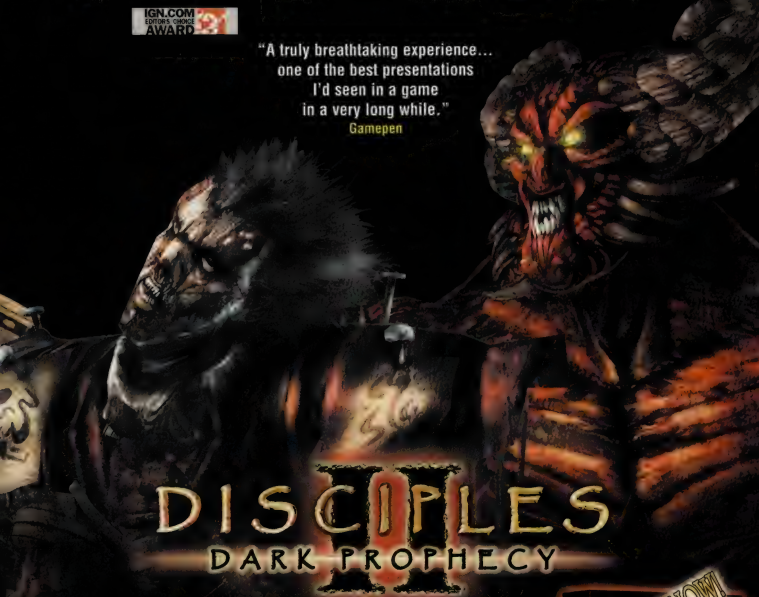

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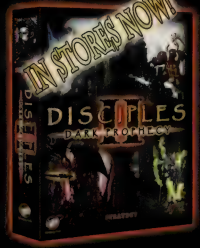

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upfront

a masterpiece in the making!

The World Exclusive Scoop! The Year's Hottest Editorial!

I was reading an article today and discovered that the upcoming *Unreal II* is not only "the Year's Hottest Shooter!" but is also "gonna [sic] knock [my] *Pokémon* socks off and save PC gaming as we know it." It will also be the "technological and gaming masterpiece that *Unreal* fans have been waiting for." Wow!

Moving on to another publication, I found out the upcoming *Dungeon Siege* is "simply spectacular" and a "masterpiece-in-the-making." Double wow! Two masterpieces for 2002, and it's still winter!

Welcome to the land of hype. Look, there's no denying that both of those games look mighty impressive at this stage of their development—we featured both on past covers, so it's not like we don't think and hope they'll turn out pretty swanky. In fact, they both may end up being masterpieces. Then again, they may not.

However, judging them at any pre-release stage, throwing around these types of meaningless, hype-filled statements like Rophynol at a fraternity party, serves little purpose beyond generating hype. These types of statements, particularly when delivered by the press, artificially raise expectations for a product beyond what the creators even intend. It's not even needed—eager fans are more than happy to generate their own hype for any popular game. On the plus side, it guarantees publication's name will appear in the game's ads, where those quotes will surely be reproduced in all of their glory.

Nearly everyone in the press is guilty of this type of pandering at some time or another. Many publications, this one included, get all high and mighty about only reviewing final products. If this is true, aren't we being hypocritical when "reviewing" or judging a game's final quality before the game is finished?

More damning, these types of comments turn the press from being a source of information for readers into a marketing tool for game companies. If a publication elects to be a cheerleader for the industry, as an editor from one of the above quoted publications described his own magazine's role, that's fine. If they want to dub every upcoming game a "masterpiece-in-the-making," that's fine too.

For them. What we can do is to make an even greater attempt to retain our independent voice, the lone one in an industry that continues to consolidate, to make a conscious effort to avoid being part of the hype machine, or at least diminish our role in it. In the past year, we've moved toward de-emphasizing previews somewhat, substituting more game-related feature stories. Down the road, we plan on introducing new types of articles that better focus on the games that you can play today as opposed to solely focusing on those you may or may not be playing six months to a year down the road.

We will not completely abandon previews, however. Yes, the vast majority of them are vapid, full of effusive praise that crosses the line from reporting to outright promotion, begging the question of whether they're ad vehicles or editorial. (Hopefully, these types of previews are found in other publications.) Are the people writing them reporters, offering up information in an entertaining manner, or quote whores serving up some ad copy for the marketing departments of game companies? If you find yourself asking these types of questions, maybe you need to demand more from your publications and their previews.

Just as there are games that warrant pre-release attention (such as *Unreal II* and *Dungeon Siege*), not all previews are useless. The better ones do a good job of maintaining an even keel when it comes to evaluating features, conveying the enthusiasm of those working on the product as opposed to that of the author. They place the games in some sort of context and focus on how and why specific features are implemented as opposed to merely parroting the fact sheets from the publisher.

And they don't fall back on using bold pronouncements to draw the reader's attention. It's the easy way out to rely on hype, to write breathless prose extolling the virtues of the great incomplete game. Instead of pandering and promotion, we will continue to focus on making our reporting entertaining and informative. It requires more work on the part of writers and editors, and in the end, we think it's worth it. And we hope readers notice the difference. ●

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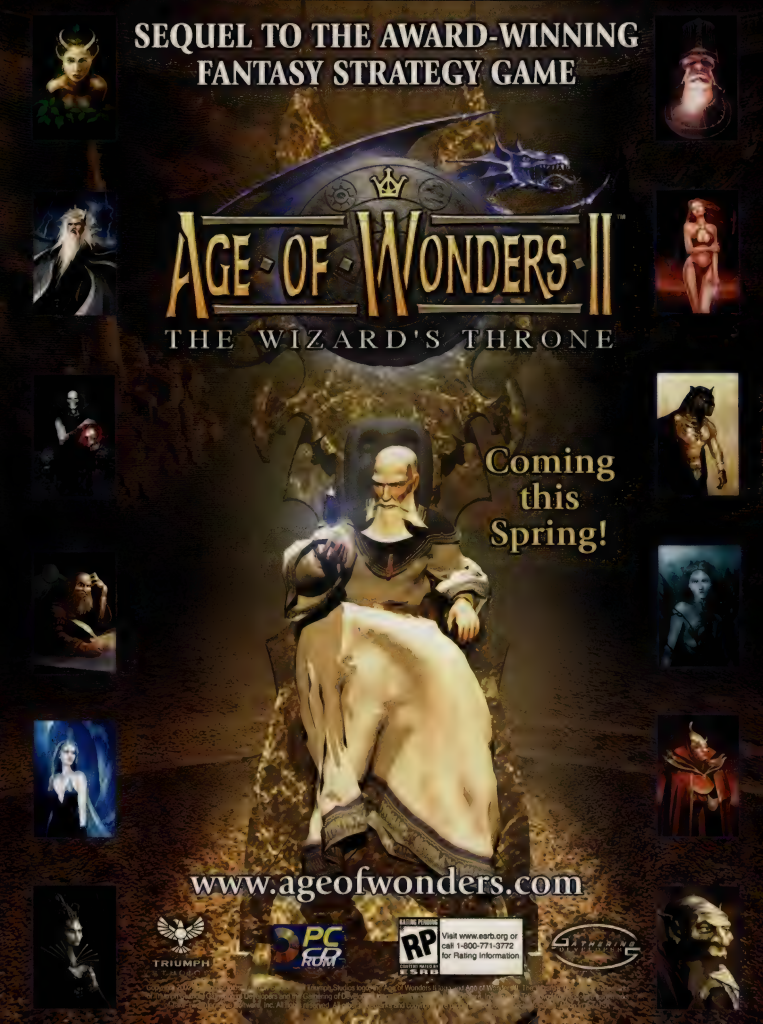
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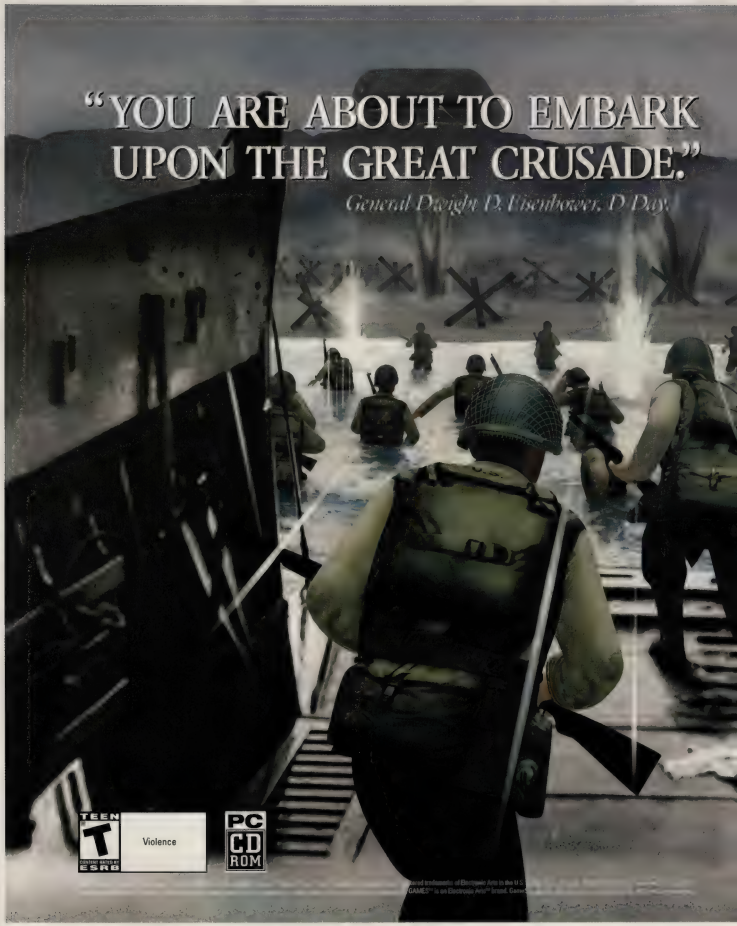
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Now You See It, Now You Don't

Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic slips through your fingers

by Cindy Yans

Amidst BioWare's flurry of litigation with Interplay, and the subsequent relocation of its *Neverwinter Nights* game to ArmadilloLand [see "Enter the Armadillo" page 21], and the frostbitten climate of Edmonton Alberta, its *Knights of the Old Republic* team has remained unflustered. This 3D role-playing game represents the first banns of the marriage announcement for the soon-to-be-happy couple, LucasArts and Bioware.

With BioWare's rising star in the world of role-playing games almost at its pinnacle, it was cinch for LucasArts to snap at the opportunity to work together. LucasArts President Simon Jeffrey says, "While I was Director of Development here, which was really just a short time, actually, I began talking to the BioWare guys because I was a big fan of *Baldur's Gate*, and hoped that something would work out with them, and they were so willing to do a Star Wars role-playing game, that it really led us to this turning point really...." And Jeffrey will continue to seek out the best and most talented developers in the world with whom to form strategic alliances. Before you get all excited reading about the nifty game features, though, there's something you should know: this game will debut on Xbox. PC gamers will have to wait.

Baldur's Wars? Star Gate?

Knights of the Old Republic uses BioWare's new Odyssey engine, which will take full advantage of all the latest graphics features of NVIDIA's GeForce 3 technology. While it may be new, it's no real stranger to the BioWare team. "It's based on a lot of things we've learned in the past developing things from *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights* and *MDK2*," says Producer Casey Hudson. "It's going to have obviously all of the state of the art GeForce 3-type specs, bump mapping, environment mapping, and so on, and it's also really designed to push the next generation hardware so we can get very realistic environments and characters and so on." You'll have full camera control with an optimal default setting.

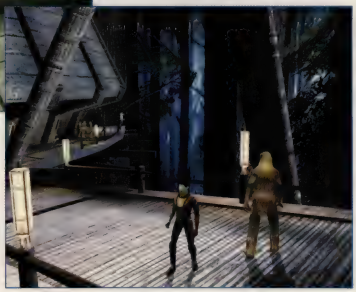
The game will be quite action-packed, more so than what we're used to seeing from BioWare, with some of the

> "We want our PC product and our Xbox product of Knights of the Old Republic to be distinctly different...We want to build a franchise and we want to work with Microsoft on exploiting a very, very cool opportunity."
>
> Simon Jeffery, President, LucasArts

action in the form of "minigames" that may remind you of those found in *Final Fantasy*. They take the role of cut scenes, actually, except that they're interactive. Instead of watching the cut scene you play it instead. It will not be overly twitchy, though. Hudson says, "It should be a reward, even for a role-playing game player who's not really into the demanding action, it's still a reward at the end of a certain section of gameplay." As for the rest of gameplay, it's a rules-based real-time system, with a strong action component.

You'll choose a gender in one of three classes, and jump directly into the fray in the world of the Old Republic—the Republic as it existed 4000 years before

Imagine lightsaber combat like Jedi Knight's in an RPG. >>> You size up R2D2. >>> I could swear there's a Wookie around here somewhere.



the movies. Given that the *Star Wars* timeline is extremely long, and they've had space travel for tens of thousands of years, the basic look and feel of the game will be quite similar to the films, but will also include *new* old things that seem to "fit" in the timeframe before the movies. The Old Republic at its height has spread throughout the galaxy and colonized a lot of planets, and there are thousands of Jedi and thousands of Sith—enough to drive the huge wars and large-scale battles that fuel the game's main conflict. Your character will level up and will gain points to assign to different skills or feats. Gaining Force powers works in much the same way. You can then choose to advance in a skill or feat, or to begin learning a new one, with each choice you make effecting your tendency toward the Light or Dark side of the universe.

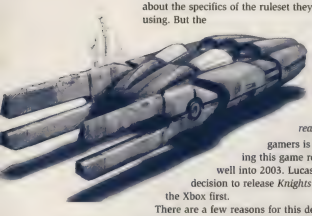
While the story requires you to play as a human, the rest of your party (up to three at a time) can be anything from Wookies to battle droids. You'll visit approximately eight worlds during your travels, some familiar, like Tatooine, and others brand new, like the spread out city of Teris, looking for the life (or death) of it like a decrepit reproduction of Coruscant. An early demonstration of the game featured a scene where Teris was a battle location that Imperial battle droids and friends were invading, while a group of Jedi Knights were running amok with lightsabers. Even at that early stage the action was impressive and gripping. Characters had very detailed animations, from eyebrow movement and moving eyes to gently rustling hair. They will display emotions like fear and pain, hopefully in a more natural way than the notorious live-action party members in 3DO's *Might and Magic VI*. Add careful lip-synching and these might be some of the most lifelike characters we've

seen in a role-playing game of this type.

Your starship, the *Ebon Hawk*, will provide most of your transportation throughout the game, although there will be other vehicles. They treat this ship almost as a main character in the sense that the *Millennium Falcon* was a main character in the movies. It has a lot of "personality and character" and adds a lot to the films' cinematics. In addition to hauling you around from planet to planet, it's also a knife sharpener! No, but it is a place for you to store your non-player characters when you're not using them in your party, and when things are safe, you can return to the ship and talk to your friends. It's a place where the storyline will develop via cut scenes and story-based dialog. "There's a lot things you can do there," says Hudson. "You can heal yourself. You can store your stuff." It is the portable Inn/Tavern of the Old Republic.

That was the good news...

The bad news is that, at this writing, there is no new information about multiplayer availability, no new information about storyline, and no new information about the specifics of the ruleset they're using. But the *really* bad news for PC gamers is that we will not be seeing this game released for the PC until well into 2003. LucasArts made a strategic decision to release *Knights of the Old Republic* for the Xbox first.



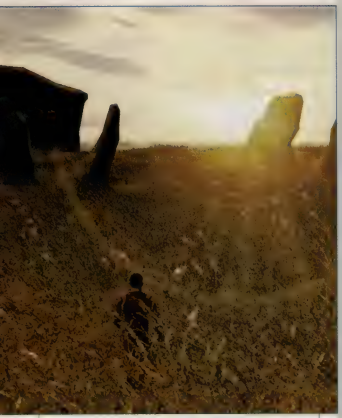
Boy meets droid, boy loses droid.

There are a few reasons for this decision, one of which is that LucasArts feels that it would be a poor marketing strategy to release two PC role-playing games this year. When it came to a decision between the no-platform-choice *Galaxies* and *Knights* (both initially targeted for fourth quarter PC release), the latter was the obvious candidate to rip from the outstretched hands of its PC fans. (Another reason is that, although the main differences between the game features seem at this point to deal mostly with the interface, there may be a few more things to flesh out for the PC version that could take longer to put together.)

Finally, LucasArts and BioWare feel that it's time to take an even deeper, very aggressive step into the console world. While it's easy to suspect a bit of this-is-an-offer-you-can't-refuse "encouragement" from Xbox's Grand Poobah, Microsoft Corporation, it's fair to say that it's understandable in today's climate for these two companies to have made this decision. After all, it's a relatively new platform, and so by taking this opportunity the pair have a chance to make an early name for themselves in the Xbox role-playing genre.

"Well, we do see, I think, a lot of people viewing Xbox as a PC port box," says Jeffery. "I absolutely don't look at it that way. We want our PC product and our Xbox product of *Knights of the Old Republic* to be distinctly different... We want to build a franchise and we want to work with Microsoft on exploiting a very, very cool opportunity."

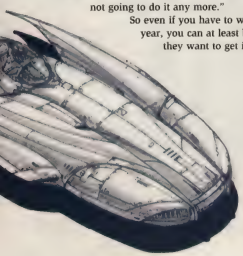
Cool opportunity or not, neither LucasArts nor BioWare want you think for one second that they're deserting their PC audience. In all honesty, it's far from a "ripped from the outstretched hands of the PC player" scenario. BioWare joint



Use of the new Odyssey Engine let's you see the grass blowing in the wind.

CEO and designer Greg Zeschuk explains, "One of the things [joint CEO] Ray [Muzyka] and I have always thought about was, we want BioWare to sort of be a combination 50-50 console and PC company, and what's really important to us is that we don't forsake either one...The last thing we want to do is forsake the audience that got us to where we are. We've been really blessed by the success we've had with the PC, so I think we're unlike a lot of companies that are turning their back on the PC, and saying, frankly, they're not going to do it any more."

So even if you have to wait until next year, you can at least be assured that they want to get it right. ●



ENTER THE ARMADILLO

Interplay's out, Infogrames is in as BioWare's Neverwinter Nights partner

by Robert Hayer

Introduced at the 1999 GenCon game faire, *Neverwinter Nights* immediately captured the attention of role-playing fans everywhere. Here was the "Great Leap Forward" that CRPGs had been waiting for: official 3rd Edition *Dungeons & Dragons* rules, a 3D world, and extensive multiplayer options including a live Dungeon Master. At the time, it seemed that Interplay had yet another fantasy hit on its hands.

Fast forward to early 2002. Interplay is out, Infogrames is in. After a flurry of lawsuits, uncertainty, and tight-lipped spin doctors working overtime, the highly anticipated and somewhat overdue epic has thrown off its ties to the troubled Irvine, California publisher and jumped ship to the French juggernaut. While rumors of problems had floated around for much of 2001, the first public sign of trouble came in September when BioWare joined Parallax (creator of *Descent*) in suing Interplay, Virgin Interactive, and Interplay's controlling majority shareholder Titus over alleged unpaid royalties among other issues. Unease over the fate of *Neverwinter Nights* grew when, in November, BioWare dropped the other shoe, announcing that it was terminating its contract with Interplay to publish the RPG.

While BioWare's Brad Grier reassured gamers in November that "*Neverwinter Nights* is shaping up nicely," and told them not to worry, worry they did. Speculation was rampant over who would wind up publishing *Neverwinter Nights*—if anyone. After all, it is not unknown for obscure legal issues to destroy promising artistic endeavors, and with so many companies and so much money at stake, gamers could be excused for being nervous.

These fears were allayed only in January 2002, when BioWare, Interplay, and Infogrames announced that everything was now hunky-dorey. In a settlement that BioWare joint CEO Ray Muzyka described as "amicable," Infogrames will publish the game worldwide, and Interplay and BioWare have settled the other issues between them, presumably those involved in the 2001 lawsuits. For gamers, that's good news, as it means that *Neverwinter Nights* is a shoe-in for a summer 2002 release. For Interplay, the news is much more ambiguous. Almost simultaneously with the loss of what many suspect would have been the company's best 2002 PC game, long time CEO Brian Fargo was replaced with Herve Caen on an interim basis as President of Interplay, ending one of the longer reigns in game publishing history. (In other news, Excite Money reported that Interplay may pursue legal action against Fargo for allegedly "soliciting company employees.")

For BioWare, a new chapter is beginning, with more publishing deals with Infogrames likely; after all, the French firm does own the rights to computer games based on the *D&D* franchise. For Interplay, the future is much murkier. Without BioWare, there seems to be little in the company's larder to continue its run as a PC games powerhouse. ●

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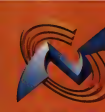

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In The Sims Online, each shard, or "city," will host up to 50,000 players. That should make for quite a variety of weirdoes.

EA hopes the enhanced 3D graphics of Lord Blackthorne's Revenge will keep Ultima Online in the black.

Courting the Mainstream

EA.com looks beyond medieval fantasy towards the online bonanza

by Robert Mayer

The Online Worlds FanFest took place in January in Austin, Texas, home of Origin Systems and ground zero for all things *Ultima Online*. Nearly 400 attendees, nearly all *Ultima* faithful, turned out to play an early version of the add-on, *Lord Blackthorne's Revenge*, and to see what else EA.com has in store for 2002. It turns out that EA.com is alive and well, with two other major online games joining its flagship sword and sorcery time-sink. The focus in Austin was fantasy, but the subtext for Electronic Arts is clear: we're more than just ogres and fairies.

Online, off-track

Not that Electronic Arts is unhappy with *Ultima Online*, far from it. "Ultima Online is our core product, our bread and butter," says Jeff Brown, the company's Vice President for Communications, who notes that medieval fantasy "is the very foundation" of the company's online efforts. Launched in 1997, the massively multiplayer fantasy game now boasts some 230,000 subscribers—a large number, especially considering that they have recouped most of the development costs, sending a hefty portion of the monthly subscription income straight into the company spreadsheets' profit line.

In the long run, though, the future for Electronic Arts' online empire lies in branching out beyond the overworked fantasy arena. That, at least, is how Brown feels. *Ultima Online* now has a host of competitors, but Brown asks, "How many new medieval fantasies does the world need?" He likens the current situation to a world where TV programming consisted of nothing but reworked and improved versions of *Gunsmoke*. "Someone has got to break out and find new audiences for a genre of fiction that goes beyond medieval fantasies," and he's hoping his own company's offerings will be leading the charge.

To that end, EA.com is focusing on two areas, free content and premium games. There are over 30 million members of EA.com, the vast majority of them playing free games through the AOL Games Channel, which EA controls through 2004. It's the fourth most popular site on the web, says Brown, and measures viewer minutes in the billions. Most of those millions are playing cards, word games, and innumerable variations of parlor pastimes, while a few hundred thousand pay to play *Ultima*—two different audiences, two different tastes.

The trick now is developing more pay-to-play content that will set EA on the gravy train of $49 boxed sales followed by $10 a month subscription fees. The key to doing that, Brown believes, is moving beyond elves, dwarves, and dragons. If interactive entertainment is really as big as television—and Brown half-jokingly points to the 4.6 million viewer hours that *UO* generates every week—someone is going to have to step beyond medieval fantasy to deliver content that appeals to a broader audience. He hopes it will

be EA.com, and therein lies much of the reason that *Earth and Beyond* and *The Sims Online* are still with us, and *Ultima Online 2* is not.

All that glitters...

Also missing, or soon to be missing, from EA.com's line up are two other products the company had at one time hoped would help in grabbing new audiences. *Majestic* is slated to go dark in late April 2002, and *Battletech 3025* never made it out of beta. Not coincidentally, also on the cutting room floor is EA's once-highly touted Platinum Service, where one slightly higher than normal monthly fee would get you access to all of EA.com's premium titles. It was a compelling idea, and one that every vendor of online entertainment is still kicking around in one form or another. Unfortunately, EA dropped the ball. "We just didn't deliver the content side," Brown admits, and consumers never had the "critical mass" of three or four persistent world games to make the service viable.

Bringing in artist Todd McFarlane is one way of reaching new fans, through both game content and toys.

The nail in Platinum's coffin may well have been *Majestic*, which debuted with a resounding thud, as over 90% of the people who tried to download the game aborted the process. Of the few who actually played the game, only a handful seemed to enjoy the prospect of waiting for hours for the game to decide it was time for more action. According to Brown, no more than 15,000 people have ever been signed up to play *Majestic* at any one time. The company announced in January that the game would end at the end of April, becoming a $5 million flop, an experiment that failed. *Majestic*, says Brown, "looked good on paper, and all the critics seemed to agree that this was going to be a real revolution, but the fact is it was not."

Neither was *Battletech 3025*, which had a long run of beta testing in 2001, but got the axe later in the year. The game, while technically competent, lacked any sort of spark, and its rather bland and homogenized version of BattleTech combat paled beside the multiplayer offerings of the *MechWarrior* series. That left *Motor City Online*, last of the 2001 titles that EA hoped would join *Ultima* in its pay-to-play lineup. While currently sporting around 26,000 subscribers—a "good start" according to Brown—the game seems to have missed the mass market its designers were shooting for. Brown says, "Obviously we're going to have to do some marketing and introduce some things to scale that up a bit."

That leaves EA.com, at the beginning of 2002, with precisely two premium games, one of which began in 1997 and has a large but rather stable population and the other which is brand-new but posting lackluster numbers. No wonder that, as Brown admits, the entire Platinum concept has vanished into thin air. "It's not a practical project right now." What might resurrect it is

"How many new medieval fantasies does the world need?... Someone has got to break out and find new audiences for a genre of fiction that goes beyond medieval fantasies..." Jeff Brown, VP for EA Communications

Will Wright, creator of The Sims, is trying to stay sane while making The Sims Online accessible, reliable, and fun—before the end of 2002.

if the two new games still under development, *Earth and Beyond* and *The Sims Online*, live up to EA's hopes. For now, though, they're both being developed with an eye towards being priced and sold separately.

Bringing in the Simoleans

Of the two, *Earth and Beyond* is the biggest gamble. By far the best shot EA.com has at landing the elusive mass market of online gamers, lies with *The Sims Online*, a multiplayer version of Will Wright's groundbreaking and best-selling *Sims* line of suburbia simulators. With a staff of over 50 working full time on the game, it's one of the company's highest priorities. Designer Wright agrees that, while *Ultima Online*'s potential audience includes mostly savvy and experienced gamers, *The Sims Online* doesn't, and its audience is unlikely to adjust well to problems. "We have three balls we can't afford to drop," Wright admits, and the biggest one is a smooth launch.

When *The Sims Online* goes live late this year, EA.com will finally find out whether the idea of a mass-market mas-

sively multiplayer game is more than a pipe dream. If *The Sims*, with its tremendous penetration of the casual gamer market, can't find an audience among gamers who haven't yet jumped into the online game arena, what will? Wright and co-designer Chris Trottier are trying to ensure the game is accessible, easy to play, and fun in short doses as well as in the marathon sessions more typical of current online games. They're also working on allowing user created content, though not for launch. "We don't want anything to interfere with a smooth launch," Wright says, so "maybe six months" after the game debuts you might see user-created content available.

Whether or not EA is able to work out the issues with user content—like, how to keep hate speech and harassment at bay, for example—they'll still have another form of custom content for you: advertising. "We're in discussion with several major advertisers and consumer products companies," says Brown, with an eye towards in-game sponsorship. After 188,000 downloads of a Pepsi machine during *The Sims* single player game's first week, EA had the ammo they needed to leverage some big name advertisers. "It's endless," says Brown, and without naming names he discusses owning a particular fast food restaurant in *The Sims Online*, or owning a particular car.

It's all part of Electronic Arts' attempt to realize the potential of online gaming as a business, a potential that Brown firmly believes is to this century what cable television was to the last. "We're not just going to be getting a bigger and bigger share of the Internet; we're going to be taking a bigger share of that audience that would have been watching television." To do that, though, EA.com is going to have to prove that there is a market for premium online games beyond the million or so fans playing the big four online role-playing games. If the future is to be more than just introducing new medieval fantasies, games like *The Sims Online* and *Earth and Beyond* are going to have to succeed in 2002. If they don't, look for a very different EA.com for 2003. ●

Earth and Beyond is one of EA's attempts to push its online offerings into new, non-fantasy realms.

Through these portals passed some 400 fans of EA's online RPG.

TRYING HARDER

The 2002 FanFest showcases *Ultima Online*'s new look

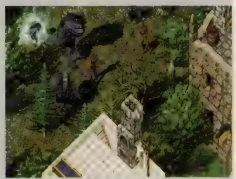
Although the Online Worlds FanFest did point out Electronic Arts' intent to broaden its online audience, the gathering was still centered on *Ultima Online* and *Lord Blackthorne's Revenge*.

With 230,000 subscribers, *Ultima Online* remains EA's core online product. Still, a slowly expanding game with five-year-old technology at its base isn't the strongest foundation for growth. However, the impressive upgrade *Blackthorne* has managed to breathe more life into the title, with very attractive 3D graphics, a refined interface, and visual content designed by noted artist Todd McFarlane.

The game's Senior Producer, Rick Hall, knows that keeping an aging game going requires a lot of work. "The only thing that will kill an online game is stagnancy," he claims, and by building on the relationship EA had with McFarlane from his work on the abortive *Ultima Online 2* project, he saw a way to inject new life into the existing game. Not just through new monsters and art, but through what Hall calls DEFCON, or Dynamic Episodic Fictional Content., which allows the players to actually change the gameworld.

Fan reaction at the show was positive, but that's to be expected. Folks like 74 year old Mike Barskey, an *Ultima Online* player from day one, take their game seriously. "It's like a life," he says, and folks like him won't leave the game any time soon. The real question is whether EA can lure fans of genres beyond fantasy to the online game world, something the FanFest didn't offer much data on one way or another.

Mike and Elaine Barskey, not quite your typical Ultima Online couple. Mike's 74.



Players battle invading Horde Demons, one of the new Todd McFarlane creatures.

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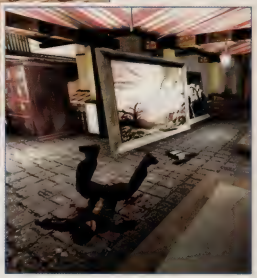
The bright colors of the Unreal engine give Tactical Ops a look distinct from other team shooters. >>> Detailed interiors ramp up the immersion level even in a multiplayer shooter.



Far from the Modding Crowd

Amateur developers make the jump to commercial stardom

by Robert Mayer

It's often been said that the best resume you can have in the game design business is an actual game. The truth of this adage is born out by the cases of mod makers who land commercial contracts. In most examples, a successful product developed as a free download was the key that opened the doors—and the coffers—of a major publisher.

Two recent games bear this out clearly. Both Sierra's *Die Hard: Nakitomi Plaza* and Infogrames' *Tactical Ops: Assault on Terror* began life as free mods. Whereas *Nakitomi* joined the ranks of retail software before releasing any playable code, *Taticalc Ops*, through the *Unreal Tournament* mod *Tactical Operations*, was popular among gamers for a year and a half before being picked up. In different ways, both these games show that there is indeed life after modding.

No really, it's better than Counter-Strike!

Though Laurent "Shag" Delayen began working on *Tactical Ops* just before Christmas in 1999, it wasn't until June 2000 that a working beta of the counter-terrorist vs. terrorist team-based game was available for download. The mod quickly gained notoriety as one of the more interesting and playable *Unreal Tournament* enhancements, and soon Delayen had an ever-growing team at Kamehan Studios working on improvements. Even before Infogrames bought in to it, over fifty people—designers, programmers, testers—were working on the project. Delayen says the move to commercial status "just happened," and wasn't really planned, though it certainly was welcomed. "It's like writing a short movie and being picked by DreamWorks to work on our own feature film," he admits.

Everyone working on the game had, Delayen says, at least a subconscious desire to go pro. Maybe that was what kept them going through the early days of the mod, when Delayen admits their work left something to be desired. "It 's really funny to see the first screenshots of *S.W.A.T.* Beta 1, our first public release in June 2000," he says. "We really came a long way." He says their early efforts sported the "ugliest hands and weapons ever made" for a computer game. He's quite proud of the work the team is doing now, though, and apparently Infogrames concurs.

The *Tactical Ops* mod inspires comparisons to *Counter-Strike*, and Delayen admits the resemblance is more than casual. "When you compare *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero* and *Global Ops* with *Tactical Ops* for example, you could say they're the same games. They are very similar." But he maintains that there are subtle differences, not the least being *Tatical cOps'* use of the *Unreal* engine, which gives the game a distinctive look. He likens these games to war movies; they may all have common themes and structures, but each is different in its own way. As a retail product, Kamehan's game will ship with a single player game that is essentially the core multiplayer game with bots playing most of the roles, just like *Unreal Tournament*'s practice sessions, Delayen says. "I really would have liked to work on a deep and complex scenario ala *Deus Ex*, but that won't be possible with *Tactical Ops: Assault on Terror* given our very short deadline."

This high-tech level reminds you that this isn't Half-Life any more.

For mod makers aspiring to profes-

sional status, he has one major piece of advice: don't give up. Turning a mod into cash isn't for the lazy or faint of heart. "If you can't do the work, finish it or get bored too easily, you won't succeed," Delayen says, and he also thinks being versatile helps. Knowing something about all the aspects of game development is a boon. Mostly, though, you have to just do it—"working on a mod is the best way to learn and experiment."

Out Foxing the Fox

Another example of a team making the jump from amateur to pro is Piranha Games, which went from working on an unauthorized *Half-Life* mod based on the original *Die Hard* movie to crafting a LithTech-powered game on Fox's payroll. "It didn't happen by accident," says Piranha's Art Director Bryan Ekman. "All of us wanted to work in the industry, and late in 1999 all the pieces just fell into place, with Vivendi Universal's Sierra Games handling the publishing duties."

Piranha Games was formed in January 2000, though the team had been working for about eight months on the project before being assimilated. They had little idea what they were getting into. "Take all the stress and hard work, multiply by 1000%, then add a million for good measure," Ekman says about the transition from dilettante to worker bee, though he hastens to add it's been worth it. Despite now having to deal with legal departments—"there's literally a million things that need to be checked and signed off on"—the rewards include access to Fox's substantial resources, libraries, and talent pool.

Yep. McLane is a lefty, so get used to some sinister shooting. >>> McLane dukes it out with thugs in the posh offices of the Nakitomi Plaza. A skyscraper offers a great variety of levels for a shooter. >>> Shhh! This is a library, you dolts

The game, which Ekman describes as falling "somewhere between *Rogue Spear* and *Quake*," boasts a morale system, a "realistic" inventory system, and over 30 single-player levels set in the skyscraper from the Bruce Willis movie. Unlike *Tactical Ops*, it's essentially a solo game, something of an oddity in the world of shooter mods. It's also one of the few license-based mods to see the light of day, which has its plusses and minuses. Because their project is based on a license, the Piranhas are both inspired and limited by their subject matter. "Basing it on the movie really sets your bounds to a single building," says Ekman, though that too has its benefits in focusing development. In addition, the team is actually getting paid for making milestones, something that's a welcome change from the free-wheeling mod days. As for getting into the business, Ekman has a few words of advice. "Passion and dedication. Combined with a great idea." And that mod you're working on—that's definitely your resume. •

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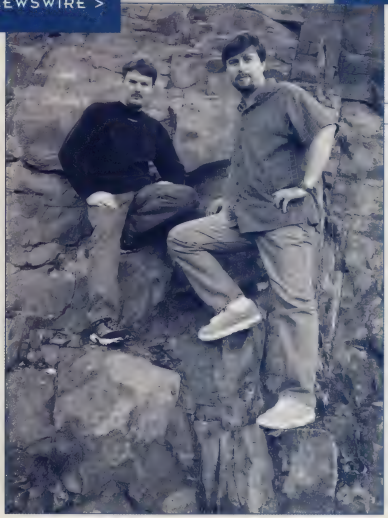


Jeff Butler and Brad McQuaid (left to right)

Escape from Norrath

Brad McQuaid and Jeff Butler leave Sony to form third generation MMORPG company

by Cindy Yans

In 1998, 989 Studios took either a litigation-sidestep or a made a very philanthropic decision (let's assume the latter). After deciding to focus its own efforts on PlayStation 2 development, it agreed (to the eventual delight of many) to fund the completion of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, *EverQuest*. Co-designers Brad McQuaid and his colleague John Smedley split from 989 to form Verant, complete *EverQuest*, and attempt to find additional funding for their other games, *PlanetSide* and *Sovereign*.

McQuaid, Smedley, Customer Service Manager-cum-Producer Jeff Butler, and a number of others, worked avidly as *EverQuest's* core team, and the game has enjoyed and continues to enjoy immense success. Sony Online inhaled Verant, and McQuaid served there as Chief Creative Officer and Vice President of Premium Games responsible for *EverQuest*, *Sovereign*, *PlanetSide*, *Star Wars: Galaxies*, and several currently unannounced projects.

By October 2001, though, all was not right in paradise. "Well, there were a lot of things going on at the time," explains McQuaid. "It was something that built up over several months. Really, what it was, there are some things I can't get into detail on, but in summary, Sony decided to really grow the company very quickly, to start a lot of new titles, and I was promoted and in a sense pushed up to a level of management where I was in charge of, at one time, five different projects, and I was becoming less and less hands on." At first he was very pleased at the promotion, feeling as though he would be able to influence a good number of projects, and attempt to infuse them with the magic that was *EverQuest*. What had seemed like a great opportunity began to sour. "As I learned more about the job and more about myself, I think I started to realize that I wasn't as happy... I had the money and the fame and the success, but as I thought back, I was much happier just being hands on and producing *EverQuest*."

So with four iterations of *EverQuest* under their belts, McQuaid and Jeff Butler (soon thereafter), decided to leave Sony and forge out on their own. With *PlanetSide* and *Sovereign* out of their hands, they began to form a new vision—a vision for a Third Generation online role-playing system to reach beyond the limits of what aficionados of the genre call "The Big Three:" *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, and *Asheron's Call*. Although McQuaid felt as though he was abandoning his child, the call to move on was too strong. "At the Vice President level at Sony, I'm not hands on, but I'm obviously not running the company, so you're in this middle ground, where you're acting almost as a liaison between upper management and development and trying to influence all the products indirectly through the managers underneath you, respecting the chain of command, which is the right thing to do, and I think I just learned enough about myself that that's not nearly as much my cup of tea as being hands on and making games."

Of course, this type of venture is far from unique—think Ion Storm, think Gathering of Developers—and now think Sigil Games Online, McQuaid and Butler's new company with which they hope to realize that vision of the next generation of MMORPG. Exactly what that is no one is saying at the moment, but McQuaid is confident that his plan is innovative. "As far as I know, I have not heard anyone else talking of these kinds of ideas," he says, "and I think that they are revolutionary enough that everyone else will have to follow. Definitely." ●

TOP SELLERS

1	HARRY POTTER & THE SORCERER'S STONE Electronic Arts Not Rated
2	THE SIMS HOT DATE Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
3	THE SIMS Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
4	ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON Infogrames Rating ★★★★½
5	EVERQUEST: SHADOWS OF LUCLIN Sony Rating ★★★★
6	BACKYARD BASKETBALL Infogrames Not Rated
7	RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN Activision Rating ★★★★
8	ZOO TYCOON Microsoft Rating ★★★★½
9	SURVIVOR: THE INTERACTIVE GAME Infogrames Not Rated
10	BACKYARD FOOTBALL Infogrames Not Rated

11. Sid Meier's Civilization III (Infogrames); 12. The Sims House Party (Electronic Arts); 13. The Sims Livin Large (Electronic Arts); 14. Empire Earth (Vivendi Universal); 15. Loopy Landscapes (Infogrames) 16. Bob the Builder: Can We Fix It (THQ); 17. Sim Theme Park (Electronic Arts); 18. SimCity 3000 Unlimited (Electronic Arts) 19.Backyard Baseball 2001 (Infogrames); 20. Madden NFL 2002 (Electronic Arts)

Source: NPD INTELECT® Market Tracking. The December list is based on units sold by forty-two retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

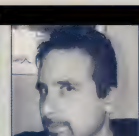
WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

Ken Rolston
Lead Designer, Bethesda Softworks

Bejeweled. [Hang head in shame.] *Myth II: The Seventh God* [fine fan campaign]. *Max Payne*. Bang bang bang bang.

Dan Cermak
Executive Producer, Westwood Studios

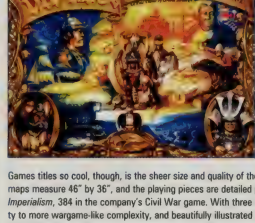
I have been playing *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault, Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, and *Halo*, but not too much because I got to get *Command & Conquer: Renegade* out the door!



Ken Levine
General Manager, Irrational Games

Return to Castle Wolfenstein. I like to shoot zee Germans! Also playing *Operation Flashpoint*, *Civilization III*, and *Etherlords*.

SPOTLIGHT



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Board games have come a long way since Candy Land and Uncle Wiggly. Even jaded PC gamers can appreciate the heft and feel of Eagle Games' offerings, like *War! Age of Imperialism*. This strategy game of world conquest in the Victorian era sets you up as the leader of a great power, and tasks you with building an empire through colonization, war, and economic power. What makes this and the other Eagle Games titles so cool, though, is the sheer size and quality of the components. The mounted high-quality maps measure 46" by 36", and the playing pieces are detailed plastic—816 of them in *Age of Imperialism*, 384 in the company's Civil War game. With three levels of difficulty, from RISK-like simplicity to more wargame-like complexity, and beautifully illustrated rule books, these are more than just pastimes—they're the ultimate face to face multiplayer hardware for strategy gamers. —*Robert Mayer*

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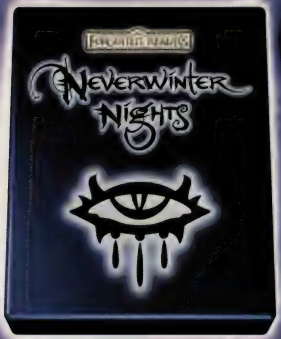

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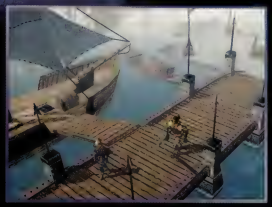
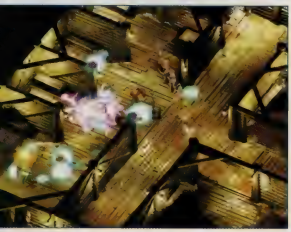
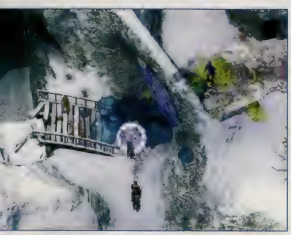
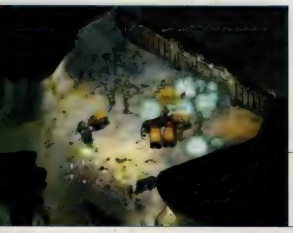


From the Developer of Baldur's Gate, Tales of the Sword Coast, Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn, and Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal.







Interplay Rides Again?

Black Isle strikes back with Icewind Dale II

by Robert Mayer

These are cold days on Black Isle, the role-playing division of Interplay. The wind whistles through the empty spaces left by departures of the *Fallout* crew, howls through the void left by key *Planescape Torment* personnel, and now swirls mournfully through the cavernous hollow where BioWare once pitched its tents. Rumors of doom and gloom fill the Internet, as gamers ponder the fate of what was once the premier role-playing house in PC gaming.

Don't head off to Old Navy for a set of mourning duds quite yet, though. Interplay isn't about to give up without a fight, and its chosen weapon is *Icewind Dale II*, a sequel to its well-received combat heavy *Forgotten Realms* game from 2000. Over the years, Interplay has taken good advantage of its access to BioWare's Infinity Engine, the venerable 2D role-playing game technology that powered the *Baldur's Gate* games, *Planescape Torment*, and *Icewind Dale*. Now, it's turning to a much-enhanced version for this latest game, due in May. Set a generation after the events in the original, it returns you once again to the mountainous region of the Ten Towns, and drops you in the middle of a growing threat to peace and prosperity.

Associate Producer Doug Avery outlines a host of changes that he hopes will set *Icewind Dale II* apart from its predecessors. Chief among these is the adoption of many rules from the 3rd Edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. "We have implemented many of the 3rd Edition rules thus far and are adding more wherever possible," he says, noting that the team is converting all of the game's items, spells, and bonuses to the 3rd Edition rules as well. Gone are the infamous THAC0 and arcane armor class and saving throw calculations of the earlier Black Isle RPGs; this new project will use the 3rd Edition's streamlined system in each case. In addition to combat, experience, and leveling rules from the 3rd Edition, Black Isle is also upgraded magic. "We are also using the 3rd Edition spells and their effects as opposed to the second edition ones used in all past Infinity Engine games," says Avery.

More combat, more puzzles, more filling

The original *Icewind Dale* was a classic dungeon romp with minimal attention to non-combat game elements. The *Heart of Winter* and *Trials of the Luremaster* expansions built on that foundation, but the new game will add a bit more adventure to the already substantial hack and slash content. "We were able to add in a lot of puzzle elements that were left out of Trials," says Avery, "and this makes the game more intellectual than your typical "hack fest"." You'll get side quests, optional tasks and more to keep you busy. You'll also get new character kits and classes, some like the Monk, Barbarian, and Sorceror taken from *Baldur's Gate II* and some, like the Votary, a Paladin kit, and the Aes Dana, a Druid kit, that are new to Infinity Engine games.

Icewind Dale II will include over 300 spells, including some new to the series, and many unique items. Some of the best items will only be available in the Heart of Fury mode, which you can access after playing through the game on normal difficulty. According to Avery, it makes the game "much more challenging," but it's the only way to get the game's best items. You won't

[from top] The game will feature a variety of environments, even though the action is still set in the Icewind Dale region. >>> Spell effects have come a long way since the first Infinity Engine games, as this shot from an indoor battle shows. >>> Environmental effects should be enhanced in the game, with more stuff happening indoors and out. >>> Expect the same sort of epic battles and frantic combat you got from the original Icewind Dale.

The 3D effects and graphic upgrades from Baldur's Gate II are evident in these screenshots. Here, the party battles a variety of nasties of the north.

be able to import your existing party from a previous game, largely because the events here take place a generation after those in the original title, but you will run into some familiar faces, including the gnomish inventor Oswald Fiddlebender. You'll also benefit from the technical advances in the game engine since the original, as this title will sport all of the graphic and interface improvements from the latest *Baldur's Gate II* versions.

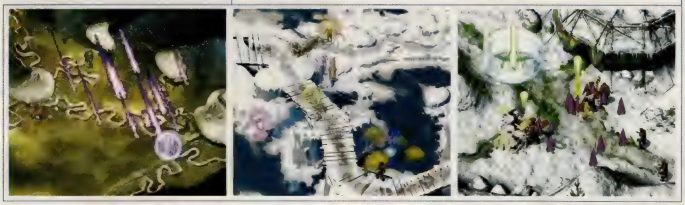
Avery says you'll be able to play as Drow, Tieflings, and Deep Gnomes, which should add some spice to things, and he promises more puzzles and environmental interaction as well. Black Isle may be working with an aging RPG engine, but it certainly appears as if they're doing their best to push it as far as it will go. Multiplayer is back, with some code changes to improve the experience, and Avery expects average players to spend about 30 to 40 hours on their first time through the game.

Desperate fury

Interplay began development on *Icewind Dale II* in late July, 2001. It's due for release this spring, after less than a year of work. That's a pretty compressed schedule, made easier no doubt by the familiarity the team has with the basic game engine. Most of the team members are *Icewind Dale* veterans, and many worked on games like *Planescape: Torment* and *Fallout*. There's also a strong contingent from Interplay's successful PlayStation 2 game *Dark Alliance*, including *Icewind Dale II*'s other producer, Darren Monahan, who shepherded the console title through development. There's no lack of talent on the team, from all appearances.

That's a good thing, too, because the game is actually rather ambitious. Given the disappointment of UbiSoft's *Pool of Radiance* game, the first 3rd Edtion *D&D* title for the computer, *Icewind Dale II* has a shot at becoming the only workable party-based RPG to successfully implement the most critical 3rd Edition rules. With all the crucial combat, spell, and advancement systems converted to the new system, it will be fascinating to see how well the game is balanced, and how well the new rules fit the now-aging Infinity Engine game system. With a variety of locations within the Icewind Dale region, a new story, and more varied gameplay, Interplay is no doubt hoping the game will rekindle the love affair between Black Isle and gamers everywhere. ●

Luckily, most of the bad guys you'll fight are ugly, so you'll have no qualms about crushing them. >>> This bridge is fraught with peril; note the complex terrain. >>> The game will feature over 300 spells, each with its own effect.



Trebuchets ring a Middle Eastern fortress. Siege warfare will play a big part in the game. >>> The Crusaders take on Arab defenders in the Holy Land; the open desert highlights the value of cavalry.

When Knights Were Bold...

The Creative Assembly goes on Crusade with Medieval: Total War

by Robert Hayer

From the halls of Tokugawa to the shores of...Constantinople? That's the epic journey UK-based The Creative Assembly is making with *Medieval: Total War*. This second of the *Total War* line is the sequel to *Shogun*, which covered warfare in feudal Japan via a hybrid of turn-based strategy and real-time tactical combat. The new game jumps a bit backwards in time and half way around the globe to tackle the European middle ages. Covering half-millennium from the first Crusade in 1095 to the siege of Constantinople in 1453, *Medieval* offers more sides, more units, and generally more of everything.

In keeping with the Western way of war, the new game will have provisions for castles, sieges, and siege engines, as well as the full panoply of medieval troop types. You will be able to play as one of twelve nations, including the English, French, Spanish, and Byzantine Empire, and depending on your patience you can tackle a range of scenarios from a campaign spanning almost four centuries to moderately more manageable topics like the Crusades, or the 100 Years War between England and France. The Creative Assembly's Michael de Plater notes that the strategic level in *Medieval* "really is a whole new game." Religion, navies, and changing technology see to that.

Medieval reprises *Shogun*'s successful game system, which combines a turn-based strategic empire building metagame with detailed 3D real-time tactical combat to resolve battles. This time around, you can expect to control over 100 types of units in battles featuring up to 10,000 combatants. Combat will range over deserts, mountains, plains and forests, and will showcase the game's new hero units, people like Richard I of England, Joan of Arc of France, and William Wallace of Austra...er, Scotland. As de Plater puts it, the game sports "over a 100 assorted saints, sinners and violent lunatics," each with specific characteristics like Piety, Dread, and Acumen.

One interesting twist that the game hopes to offer is the challenge of managing changing technology over time. As you work through the campaign, the medieval battlefield will be transformed by new weapons and armor, and you'll have to adjust as bows give way to guns and cavalry loses its position of dominance. That, plus the variety of campaigns in the game, should keep things fresh. It looks like you'll get the chance to match Edward I against the Scots, take on Turkish Janissaries, and help El Cid conquer Spain. Such a variety is always welcome, especially if the game's basic combat engine is robust. Given the success of *Shogun*, you can expect a fairly refined tactical battle game; more questions remain about the turn-based strategic system, which in the first game had some problems with the AI and game balance.

Judging from these early shots, the develop-

Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war! A castle burns as Europe feels the brunt of Total War. >>> Cannons and coursers... you'll have to manage armies of mounted knights and new-fangled cannon to be successful.

er has done a good job of capturing the look and feel of European and Near Eastern battles in this era, and the impressive spectacle of medieval armies is enough to get any gamer's blood pounding. This spring we'll find out when The Creative Assembly gets *Medieval* on strategy gamers. There aren't many good medieval strategy games out there, and a really good one would be really welcome. ●

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Our heroes battle Pinstripe and his thugs. >>> El Diablo and Alchemiss battle giant lizards in downtown Patriot City. >>> Minute Man lays the smack down. [good crop candidate]

For Freedom!

The world finally gets its superhero game, but will it "get" it?

by Jason Cross

Over the course of its existence, the game industry has had a field day denying gamers a good PC superhero game, as once promising games like *Guardians: Agents of Justice* and *Champions* were axed one after the other. But fear not, fans of men and women in tights; it appears that one game is going to make it—Irrational Games' *Freedom Force*—and it's coming from the same developers that produced *System Shock 2*, this publication's "Game of the Year" in 1999. After playing with a nearly finished alpha build, there's a whole lot to like.

Cars make good weapons

The game combines tactical squad-based combat with role-playing-style stat-building and character customization. The isometric 3D world is colorful and lively, mostly thanks to a physics system in which nearly everything reacts. Powerful, superhero-y actions just don't feel right if they're not accompanied by powerful, superhero-y effects. Light poles snap, barrels explode, the street scorches, cars tumble, and if you really manage to make a mess, you can reduce any building to rubble. It's quite a switch from most 3D games, and it takes some getting used to. What is window-dressing in most games is useable here, and the mindset that "hey, that car over there would make a good shot-put" doesn't come naturally.

It's especially important to wrap your mind around the idea of chucking phone booths around and clubbing bad guys with stoplights, because it turns out that *Freedom Force* is actually pretty rewarding as a tactical strategy game. Characters are diverse and, especially early in the game, have very specific talents and plenty of weaknesses. The real-time, point and click nature of directing your heroes belies the tactical complexity of making best use of them. After the first few missions, your combat strategy will definitely mean the difference between rounding up the evildoers unscathed and clicking the "retry mission" button after your entire team is wiped out. The biggest problem with the combat in this not-quite-done version of the game is the chaotic nature of it. You can pause and give orders, and even

adjust the pause speed in the options menu if you prefer super slo-mo, but large battles still get a bit unruly. Though it's easy to get a character to do what you want, thanks to liberal use of context-sensitive menus, things happen so fast that a good-sized battle with four heroes and a few enemies quickly degenerates into a Chinese fire drill.

Campy or corny?

Freedom Force is based on the Silver Age comics of the 60s. Comics at the time were full of simple, one-dimensional characters with black-and-white motivations: you're either pure evil and want to take over the world, or you feel a desperate need to defend the helpless and bring bad guys to justice. Every time you attack someone, you have to shout a corny battle-phrase. Enemies come in two forms: Communists and Space Aliens. Superpowers are the result of either radiation or some mysterious "Chemical X."

Dial down the center, evildoers! >>> Not many games let you destroy entire buildings.

> "The game is full of cheesy dialogue and hammy voice acting, to the point where you'll laugh out loud from kitsch-factor alone. In other words, it's perfect."

This is the superhero world of which *The Tick* is a parody. *Freedom Force* is set in this world as well, but plays it straight. It's full of cheesy dialogue and hammy voice acting, to the point where you'll laugh out loud from kitsch-factor alone. In other words, it's perfect. But it might also be doomed to fail in a world where most gamers bought comics during the Reagan administration. Will players understand that it's supposed to be so corny? It's quite possible that the market at large simply won't appreciate a throwback to the comics of 35 years ago, no matter how well the game plays. There's a fine line between "refreshing and original" and "unmarketable financial disaster."

If successful, *Freedom Force* will extend to a series of three games, one in the 60s, one in the 70s, and the last in modern times, with characters growing and their portrayal changing over time. "As this game serves as PC gaming's real introduction to comic books, we feel strongly about starting from the beginning," says Irrational's Ken Levine. "Superheroes are like mythological characters. They need to be written large."

Roll your own hero

But the best part about Irrational's superhero game isn't the insanely interactive 3D world, surprisingly tactical combat, or even the incredible 60s Silver Age comic book feel. It's the depth and breadth of character customization. As you progress through the storyline, you encounter new heroes who join your squad, and after each mission you earn experience and prestige for the deeds you've accomplished. Tackle those secondary objectives and knock out a few extra thugs, and your fame spreads.

You can use experience to improve your characters' powers and attributes, and prestige to "buy" the help of new heroes. Yes, you can make your own custom hero, and it's absolutely brilliant. Pick from any of the standard character models in the game, pick a skin (clothing) and a name, choose your attributes, and start making powers. There are literally dozens of powers, each of which has a slew of parameters. In other words, you can make literally millions of different superheroes. Wading through all this is a snap with an easy, well-organized in-game interface, right down to picking one of what must be hundreds of special effects. The more powerful your custom heroes are, the more prestige it will take to get them to join Freedom Force. Go ahead—make Superman. Just don't expect him to join your puny little band of newbie do-gooders.

When it comes to fan support, *Freedom Force* will hit the ground running. Irrational released the tools for making new characters last year, so even months before release you can download literally hundreds of models for all your favorite Marvel and DC characters from several fan sites (illegally, of course, since Marvel hasn't granted anyone permission to reproduce them in the game… get them before they get yanked). The forthcoming release of the mission editor and other tools should produce plenty of interesting mods: superhero powers, a decent physics engine, and a fully destructible environment make for a pretty compelling mod-maker's sandbox. ●

These are good examples of how multiple levels and creative topography make for excellent shooter scenarios.

Maim For Fame

Sniping your way to the top with Hitman 2

by Cindy Yans

Whether you loved or hated *Hitman: Codename 47*, and there seemed to be no middle ground, Io Software is striving to make the sequel further titillate its supporters and placate the naysayers by overcoming the main problems that the critics sprayed soundly with virtual sputum. Oh, everyone wanted to love it, but the wonderfully stylized, bloody, graphic kill scenes and solid visual style were somehow tainted by a cumbersome control scheme and missions that seemed unnecessarily puzzle-focused. *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* is a similar game, retaining everything people loved about the first product, and attempting to streamline the rest. The game is divided into eight chapters and takes place in six different locations around the world, including Italy, St. Petersburg, Japan, North Africa, and Malaysia.

Hey, barcode neck! Yeah you

You still play trusty old 47, and may be happy to know that the really tall, bald, white guy, so unique in his surroundings that you wonder why everyone doesn't immediately peg him as an assassin to begin with, looks a whole lot less like a penis this time around. And in first person mode, new to the sequel, you don't have to see him at all.

In addition to the need to recover from too much UPC scanning, our dubious hero needed also to take some time to reflect upon his violent past and perhaps find some inner resolution. So he went to a Sicilian monastery. Just as Nirvana was about to become reality, the poor thug was discovered by a representative of Russian organized crime who duped him into repeating his old pattern. All of a sudden, 47 finds that he himself is the target of a highly trained assassin. And now it's time for another 21 missions of Truth or Dare.

If looks could kill

We were able to take a hands-on look at a very early version of the game, and as one would expect, it is absolutely gorgeous. Not only are the levels interestingly laid out, with indoor and outdoor locations, rooftops, sewers, and waterfronts, but the architectural detail, in every case, is extraordinary. "All the level design was done by a professional architect, so the details are very realistic," says former QA tester turned public relations specialist for publisher Eidos.

If you remember the expansive size of the levels in the first game, the ones here will seem a lot smaller, but the developer thinks that's a good thing. "They're kind of chopping them [the levels] down to where there's a lot more going on in a specific level," says Vistad. "There's a lot more detail and not so much running around everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. You sort of get in there and do your thing instead of running through the rain forest for 45 minutes."

While the version used for this article wasn't optimized, at this point it runs smoothly and "feels" just about right, even without the artificial intelligence intact quite yet. Technologically, *Hitman 2* uses an upgraded version of Io's own Glacier Engine, the force behind the first game. In addition to providing real time lighting, hardware T&L support, and using the capabilities of Geforce 3 video cards, the modified engine will allow the developers to work with any platform, while taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of each system—a solution a lot of developers who are moving toward multi-platform are taking.

A better way to die

The game has an extensive weapons list, several of which are brand new for this title. There is destructible terrain depending upon the type of material and the ammunition used. For instance a sniper rifle will pelt a round right through a wooden door, but a metal wall will not receive much damage.

In experimenting, there will be some tough decisions about weapon-carrying. The AI is often sensitive enough to "know" that you're not who you seem to be. (Yes, as white and bald as you are, you still manage to fool the enemy.) If you're carrying a weapon, you may be forced to drop one that you'd prefer to hold on to in order to make it past some dangerous situations.

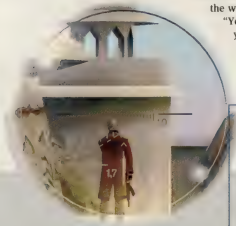
The Matrix-style of "coming in guns blazing" is partnered with many stealth options. Some of the new weapons are non-lethal, and the pacifists among you (yeah, a pacifist is going to run right out to buy this game) will recognize

when something is not a threat, and choose to paralyze enemies rather than kill them. In fact, you can probably get through the whole game and kill only your target victims without having to waste a single bullet. Wire strangulation is really well done—and looks absolutely brutal, as you sneak up behind a guard, slip the cord around his neck and pull as he chokes, flails, and eventually collapses into a heap. You can steal his clothes, leaving him in his black boxers—every undressable character wears black boxers (not to mention that all clothes fit all people)—and then drag his limp corpse over a railing where it will hang there—upside down. Then you can leave him there to draw flies, or shoot the fellow down until he smacks into the pavement below.

Can it be fixed and *still* be no fun?

With gorgeous graphics, much more intuitive controls, an in-mission save feature (thank God), and a well tuned score by the original composer who, using the official orchestra of Hungary, turns out some chilling sound reminiscent of a few (oc)cult classics, the outcome will depend, once again, on how interesting and balanced the missions are. Only later this Spring will we find out whether 47, a veritable Twinkie in a field of Hostess Cupcakes, will really be able to charm the pants off you as well as he does off his victims. And he *does* off his victims. And if he succeeds, then the world will be singing, "You put your assassin, you put your ass-ass-out, you put your assassin and you shake it all about...." ●

Oh no! J'accuse in the Jacuzzi. >>> Note the detail of the columns and the intricate artwork on the building. >>> Sometimes it's not as easy to aim while kneeling.



If guns could kill

If guns could kill, and they can, so can fiber wire and poison. Gone is the last game's pre-mission shopping spree, where you were able to choose which items you wanted to bring with you. Instead, you'll find weapons and items either placed in the gameworld, or available from one of the many corpses you're likely to leave around the landscape. Here is a complete list of the weapons you will be able to use:

KNIVES	CLOSE COMBAT	GUNS	SUB MACHINE GUNS	RIFLE	SNIPER RIFLE	BOMB
Pentagon	Fiber Wire	Python	MP5	M60	R93	Remote and trigger
Scalpel	Chloroform	Hardballer (silenced)	MP5SD6	AKSU	Dragunov	Car bomb
Kitchen	Syringe (poison)	Hardballer	Uzi	M4A1	Walther WA2000	Trip laser
Axe		Beretta(silenced)		SPAS12	Walther Custom	
		Beretta			Barrett M95	
		Desert Eagle			Cross Bow	
		Ruger .22 (silenced)				
		PSM				
		Colt				

A Saracen-type town, fully developed. The game offers three fleshed out paths you can follow. >>> Here, Empire farms provide the food necessary to sustain an army. Note the hills; smooth fertile land is necessary for good agriculture.

Once a Warrior King

Putting the strategy back in real-time fantasy gaming

by Robert Mayer

When in doubt, summon a demon.

***Warrior Kings* took** a circuitous path to its current home. It began as an Eidos game, moved on to Sierra, where Vivendi Universal decided the title just didn't fit into their publishing schedule, and eventually ended up with Vélizy, France-based Microids. Now it's slated to arrive in the US in late March, as the spearhead of the company's American invasion. As the first of 17 games the publisher has planned for North America in 2002, there's a lot riding on this swords and sorcery epic.

"*Warrior Kings* is a 3D real-time strategy game," says David Bailey, Managing Director of developer Black Cactus. But the former accountant turned game company boss doesn't think there's anything really quite like it on the market now. "It's not 'kind of like' anything much," he claims, as he demonstrates some of the depth and variety the game offers.

The basic structure of the game is familiar enough. In the solo campaign you play Artos, a victim of a Church fallen under the sway of a corrupt Patriarch, and sole survivor of a vicious attack. Through a branching single-player campaign you strive to regain your position and status, oust the evil Patriarch, and make the corrupt Empire pay for its sins. Along the way your choices determine the sort of units you'll be able to field in battle. The Empire has strong, expensive and relatively slow units and is suited to a defensive style of play; it can rely on the One God and the Church for spiritual aid. The Pagans are cheap, light and fast, and can call on demonic forces. The Renaissance side enlists the aid of technology, which while not as spectacular as divine or infernal intervention tends to last a lot longer.

Combat is based on real-world historical research, and features four basic types of units, heavy and light infantry and heavy and light cavalry, including missile units. There are also siege weapons and of course demons and other summoned creatures, including succubae and angels. "We tried to use medieval visions," says Bailey; the game is sort of a Hieronymus Bosch view of the Middle Ages, where devils and magic are real and pagan tattoos really do protect you against arrows. Formations play a big role in combat, but the real star is the terrain, which is fully 3D. Going uphill is slow, firing downhill is good, and mud makes cavalry charges futile. With very flexible pan and zoom controls, you can spend a lot of time noodling around to find the best spot for an archer ambush or a safe reverse-slope position.

The strategy part comes in with the economic system, which relies on peasants who harvest gold, stone, and wood, and who plant farms. They collect resources and deposit them in villages, but you can't really use your resources until they arrive at your keep. They do this via wagons, which are subject to capture and destruction. "How you set up your supply lines is absolutely vital," says Bailey, and in multiplayer games raiding supply lines is sure to be a great pastime. As you build your town you are aided by automatic wall building, to reduce the tedium and most of your time is supposed to be spent on grander issues like securing resources and scouting the battlefield. Combat is skewed towards the "realistic," with well-supplied and positioned forces able to defeat much larger but more poorly led armies.

The game is complex—the introductory scenario takes around two hours to finish, and sprawls across a huge map—but rewards players who take the time to master its many nuances. "The game is tough," says Bailey. "It's a 3D world, and every bit of terrain, even a couple of meters of height elevation make a big, big difference." Is that what gamers want? Microids and Black Cactus will be finding out soon. ●

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COVE SWEET COVE

Tropico 2: where pirates go after a hard day's work

by Tom Chick

If you're walking in San Francisco's Sunset district, you might pass a tinted glass store front with a buzzer on the door. Behind the glass you'll see a big plastic trash can with the words "Frog City" written in magic marker. It's hardly a storefront sign—it's there to keep the neighbors from stealing their trash can—but it's the only way you'd know you're standing in front of the office of this small group of modest developers.

For a company working on its fourth game, a sequel to the banana-republic strategy game *Tropico* dubbed *Tropico 2: Pirate Cove*, Frog City is small. There are only nine people in this second story office, located over a bank. You can hear the rumble of the vault closing downstairs every day at 5pm. Some of the people who work here live close enough to ride their bicycles, which are propped against the walls and under the stairwell. There are tire scuff marks on the walls where the bikes have been carried in over the years. There are three vacuum cleaners crowded into one corner. They're behind a skateboard and a few scooters, which have obviously been ridden up and down the length of the office, much to the distress of the ragged carpet.

Bill & Ted & Rachel's excellent adventure

Frog City president Rachel Bernstein wears her dark hair pulled back from her Mediterranean face. She's talkative and amiable, the kind of woman who would insist you stay for dinner. Her husband Ted Spieth is slouched atop a giant inflatable ball, one of the strange doodads in this office, only slightly less an eyesore than their big orange couch. He's a quiet, beefy guy who looks like he might beat you up, but then he talks and you realize he's just kind of shy.

They were introduced by mutual friends at Princeton, where Rachel studied computer science and Ted studied psychology. After school, Ted worked variously in pizza delivery, paralegal work, and plant doctoring. For this latter job, he would come to an office building, cut the sick parts off the plant, and declare it cured. He got fired when the janitors went on strike and he refused to cross the picket line to tend to sick plants.

Ted's brother Bill, a skinny guy with a graying ponytail, looks like someone who would drive a vintage Volkswagen Beetle. His glasses and trimmed mustache give him a bookish look. He leans back like a professor when he talks. He got a law degree from Harvard, did legal advocacy work for three years, and then got fed up and quit.

One night in the winter of 1994, while Rachel was working at home, porting some game to the ill-fated Phillips CD-i, Ted and Bill were fooling around with a board game in the dining room. "Hey, you should make our game," Ted said, poking his head into the office where she was programming away. The two brothers had always made up games, even creating their own role-playing system when they were kids and couldn't figure out how to get a copy of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

"I said, 'Yeah right, okay, but you know you have to do some boring stuff'," she recalls, "As far as I was concerned, they were just kind of these dilettantes." But before long, they'd created the prototype for what would become *Imperialism*. "We had saved up some money to make a down payment on a house. So it came down to 'do we start a game company or buy a house?'". The house went by the wayside and the three of them formed Frog City (the name is a play on Fog City, a nickname for San Francisco).

The company's most recent title, *Trade Empires*, suffered from some questionable choices, as they'll freely admit. But it taught them a valuable lesson in the importance of marketing: you have to get the name of your game out there before you put it on the shelves. One way to ensure

[left] Wealthy captives stay at hotels until you decide to ransom them for money

this is to develop a sequel, which has inherent name recognition. This is part of what attracted Frog City to *Tropico 2*.

From banana republics to buccaneers

In *Tropico*, you're the dictator of a small island during the Cold War. In *Tropico 2*, you're a pirate king in the seventeenth century. Don't bother looking for a backstory with a time machine or how this is a prequel about the dictator's great great grandfather, because there isn't one. *Tropico 2* is a sequel without a segue.

Based on the success of *Tropico*, the publishers at Take Two wanted an expansion pack. But the game's designer, PopTop president (and *CGM* columnist) Phil Steinmeyer, had no desire to do it himself. "You work on a game for two years and you don't want to have anything to with it anymore," he jokes. "I'm like, 'Okay, other people can do *Tropico* stuff'." During the search for another developer, Steinmeyer spoke with Rachel Bernstein of Frog City, who he knew from regular conversations at the Game Developer's Conference. Frog City was still finishing up its latest game, *Trade Empires*, so they wouldn't have been able to work on the expansion.

What about a sequel?

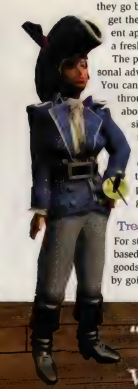
"The idea just kind of bubbled up," Steinmeyer says. However, there weren't a lot of specifics about what the sequel would be like. "We knew we couldn't do another Castro style game. There just wasn't enough material to do it twice." So everyone at Frog City brainstormed, looking for a twist.

"We were all talking one day," Bernstein recalls, "when [lead engineer] Mark [Palange] said, 'Oh yeah, I meant to mention this the other day: what about pirates?' He just kind of dropped it out there, like no one was going to like it. But we were all like, 'Pirates? Pirates! Yeah!'" It was the perfect twist that caused everything to fall into place.

"*Tropico*," Steinmeyer muses, just saying the name to hear how it sounds. "I mean, come on, '*Tropico*'. The name is just 'tropical.' It's like 'island.' It's a setting. It's a great place for a pirate game. I think it's the perfect direction to move the franchise. Too many sequels think inside the box. They think it's gotta be just like the previous game. But this is definitely a departure. It's got the geographic setting and the humor, but otherwise it's a major shift."

"Other pirate games are on the ships," Bernstein says, recalling Sid Meier's *Pirates*, Hothouse Creations' *Cutthroats*, and Akella's *Sea Dogs*, "but this is the pirate's secret base, where they go back to satisfy their wenching and gambling needs and get their ships reloaded to go out again. It's definitely a different approach. Pirates are a pretty rich topic, but we've found a fresh angle."

The player assumes the role of a pirate king, with a list of personal advantages and disadvantages, just like *Tropico*'s dictators. You can jump into a randomly generated scenario or play through a campaign of linked scenarios that progress through about 100 years of Caribbean history. The basic gameplay is similar to *Tropico*: you keep track of your population's needs, put down buildings, tweak the occasional setting, and issue edicts. For the most part, you just set it up and enjoy the animated bustle of your little city. However, there are significant differences in the economy and the population that should make the sequel feel like a new game with a reworked set of rules.



Treasure island

For starters, *Tropico 2* uses what Frog City calls "a plunder-based economy." In *Tropico*, you made money by exporting goods or attracting tourists. But this time, you'll make money by going out and stealing it. Your pirates set sail to prowl the seas and, barring any mishaps, they'll eventually return with a boatload of booty. As with the first game, there's a system of raw materials and processed resources, but these exist almost entirely to make your pirates happier and more efficient. Build stuff to make your pirates better, because better pirates steal more money, and more money lets you build stuff to make your pirates better.

Pirates have a range of needs and skills. To varying degrees, every pirate needs resting, feasting, wenching, gambling, drinking, and stashing. Provide them with a place to eat, drink, sleep, avisit courtesans, gamble, and carouse to meet their first five needs. Stashing involves their desire to put away plundered money, effectively removing it from your island's economy. These needs can change depending on the situation. For instance,

> " Pirates are a pretty rich topic, but we've found a fresh angle."
>
> [Frog City president] Rachel Bernstein

older pirates wench less and stash more.

Pirates have skill levels in seamanship, navigation, cannons, muskets, and blades. They also have qualities like leadership and courage. Some of these can be improved by building a pirate school and issuing an edict to send a pirate there. Other skills can be improved by building certain structures. An observatory will boost all your pirates' navigation skill. A parrot aviary will give a pirate the extra leadership that comes from having a parrot on his shoulder. A hat maker will give him the extra courage a pirate gets from having a scary pirate hat. Obviously, Frog City isn't abandoning *Tropico's* sense of humor, and it's certain that the team's own wry sense of humor lends a wealth of resources. After all, it's been well honed along the company's somewhat bumpy ride toward a more mainstream profile.

Sid Meier's The One That Got Away

While shopping the *Imperialism* prototype around, it went through a variety of names, including *Sphere of Influence* and *Age of Industry*. At one point, they were in negotiations to publish it as *Sid Meier's Industrialization*. Finally, they signed a contract with SSI and began a fifteen-month development cycle. But SSI kept getting excited about adding new features. The schedule was pushed back in fits and starts to give them more time. "I didn't like that," says Rachel, who's known for efficient scheduling and meeting deadlines, "You can't keep moving the finish line of the race and expect people to sprint at the end." Finally, after the fifteen-month project had been extended to two years, the game was finished. Frog City handed it over to SSI and started work on *Pantheon*, a role-playing/strategy hybrid set against the backdrop of the Trojan War.

Luckily it turned out that *Imperialism* exceeded all expectations. The publisher was eager for a sequel. So Frog City decided to try to do two games at once. But as SSI began its slide through a long succession of sales and reorganizations, they could only keep one of Frog City's projects, opting for the *Imperialism* sequel. *Pantheon* had to go by the wayside and Bill is particularly disappointed that it was never finished. "It would have been great," he says, "Even after all these years, no one's done anything like it." The idea was that your hero would have to go on quests to improve the city building part of the game, which

As pirates earn fame and gold, they'll upgrade their homes from tents made out of sails to fancy mansions

If you want to expand your booty-gathering capacity, you'll need a shipyard to make more ships for more expeditions

would in turn improve your hero's ability to go on quests.

At first, they envisioned *Imperialism II* as one of those gold editions/sequels, with a few new features added to the original. "We called it Little Imp 2," Rachel says. But SSI pushed the release back several months to avoid direct competition with *Heroes of Might and Magic III*, *Alpha Centauri*, and *Call to Power*, all of which were in the pipeline for a Christmas 1998 releases. This gave Frog City more time to expand the design, fleshing it out into a full-fledged sequel and even bringing in resources from *Pantheon*. Ironically, the competing titles all missed their Christmas release and all four games came out next spring within a few weeks of each other. All are hoping that *Tropico 2* enjoys a tighter ship.

And speaking of ships...

Pirate ships are the cornerstones of your economy. You can build them as an advanced form of industry, and if you're really lucky you can capture them. They work somewhat like buildings in *Tropico*, where you chose the best workers based on their skill

levels and plugged them into a building's available slots. Similarly, you assign your choice of pirates to the slots for a ship's captain, lieutenants, and crew. Stock your ship with food and equip it with cannons, muskets, and cutlasses. Different kinds of ships have different crew requirements and storage capacities. Set the ship's preferred tactic in combat. Does it attack from a distance, close to short range, or attempt to board enemy vessels? Set which nationalities it will attack and how much of the gold the crew gets to keep for themselves. Each ship has a satisfaction rating, which goes up as the ship is docked and the crew runs around the island meeting their needs. The higher the satisfaction rating the less likely the crew will be to mutiny if things get tough at sea. Eventually, the ship will be ready to set sail.

Tropico 2 has a strategic map of the Caribbean, divided into about 20 sea zones. At first, you only have access to the zone immediately adjacent to your pirate island, but as you send your ships out to explore, you gain access to more zones and learn the location of colonies and trade routes, which are randomized each time you play. You give a ship orders to plunder a specific zone. The amount of time it takes to get there and back is a factor of the captain's navigation skill. How it fares in ship-to-ship encounters is a factor of the captain's seamanship, the crew's skills, the type of ship, and the weaponry available.

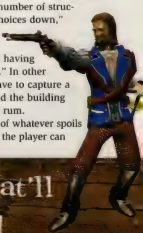
As soon as a ship gets badly beat up, runs out of supplies, or fills up with booty, it returns home, where it restocks while the crew takes shore leave to meet their needs. When the satisfaction level is high enough, it automatically returns to the scene of its last mission. Unless you intervene, pirate sorties are an automatic process, resulting in occasional losses and a regular income of gold. But perhaps more important than the gold are the captives.

Kidnapped

Whenever your pirate ship returns, you get a report on how it fared and what booty it brought back. "The main thing you're looking forward to when you see what you've got is captives," says designer Bill Spieth, "There are a lot of different skilled captives that'll make the island run more efficiently and the only way to get them is to kidnap them."

For instance, you'll need captives in order to unlock buildings in *Tropico 2*. "We kept basically the same number of structures from *Tropico*, but we narrowed the choices down," Spieth explains, "At the start of a scenario, you can't build much. In general, the requirement for building an industry is having captured a skilled worker for that industry." In other words, if you want a rum distillery, you have to capture a skilled rum distiller, and then you can build the building and that guy will work in it and make you rum.

On one hand, this puts you at the mercy of whatever spoils your marauding pirates stumble across. But the player can



"There are...different skilled captives that'll make the island run more efficiently and the only way to get them is to kidnap them."

[designer] Bill Spieth

IT'S NOT JUST MEDIEVAL...

Frog City expanded on Tropico's character system to add animation for dueling, peg leg limping, and drunken reeling

Supply your surgeons with lumber and they'll make peg legs to improve the health of your pirates

skew this by telling his pirates where to sail and which nationality to attack. "To a certain extent you can try to control what path you want to take through the building tree by targeting your missions. You can decide who you want to plunder based on the skills you want to find. So if you wanted to get the best possible cook, you have to go after the French ships. If you want the best shopkeeper, you need an English ship. Where do the best courtesans come from?" he asks his brother Ted, also a designer at Frog City.

"Spain," Ted answers.

"We have a table," Bill explains. Sure enough, there's an *Excel* spreadsheet with their own seventeenth century national stereotypes. But not all captives are skilled. So what good are the unskilled captives?

"They do all the heavy lifting," Bernstein says, pointing out how each building has its own gopher to carry goods. In *Tropico*, you had to build and staff teamster offices to move food, raw materials, and manufactured goods around your island. As the lifeblood of your economy, there was a lot riding on these little guys. But Frog City wanted to smooth out some of the kinks that came from Tropicans having to walk all over the map. "We wanted to figure out why Tropicans were spending so much time walking a long way and what can we do to make them work more efficiently," she says.

Roads were one solution. Whereas roads never really worked very well in *Tropico*, they're essential in the sequel, as characters will only travel on roads. Giving each building its own dedicated teamster was another solution. In *Tropico*, you had to carefully place construction offices and marketplaces, but the equivalents in *Tropico 2*, the construction tent and chuck wagon, are moveable so they can be situated anywhere you need workers or food. Captives also play a big part in reducing travel time. Since they don't have many needs to meet, they don't have to visit many buildings.

No, not the towel, anything but the towel!

"Unlike *Tropico*, where you try and keep everybody happy more or less, your goal with captives' happiness, from your point of view, is to try to make them as afraid and as despairing as possible," Bill Spieth says with a sadistic chuckle, "You want to convince them that it's impossible to escape and that the pirates are powerful and great. You also have to feed them a little bit or they'll try to escape because they don't want to starve to death."

There's a security level for each area of the map that helps determine whether or not a captive will try to make a break for it. Security is a factor of how you place structures like forts, watchtowers, and stockades. Almost every building has a slot to employ a pirate overseer. You can also provide churches to opiate the captives and convince them to accept their sorry lot (pirates, as we all know, are atheists and have no use for churches). Then there's the interrogation chamber, which was originally a torture chamber. You hit a captive with an edict and he goes to the chamber. "It's another way to find out information about sea zones, trade routes, and the locations of settlements," says Ted Spieth.

"But you'll want to pick a captive who you think might know something," Bill chimes in, "A thought bubble page for captives will be set up so you'll get a tip that that guy might know something, so maybe it's worth sending him off to the interrogation chamber."

"But it's a little risky," Ted says, "He may die."

Bernstein breaks in. "They had this little torture thing going and I kept wondering whether it was really funny or whether it was just that the guys thought it was funny. Ted was making the torture pirate, so I asked, 'Can you make him funny?' So now he's a guy in a wife beater shirt, you know those white T-shirts, and he's got a little hood over his head and he towel flicks the captives. That was a torture thing I thought was funny."

Chalk up one more point for the light-heartedness of a woman's touch. "You want to be making fun of the people on this island," Bernstein says, "Pirates are good for that. There are a lot of groups in the world that you can't make fun of, but pirates aren't one of them."

Although *Tropico* is a game with a deep undercurrent of earnest strategy, this pleasantly amiable approach gives it much of its appeal, and with *Tropico 2* following in those jolly footsteps, this might be the game that puts Frog City's name on the map. And maybe a year from now, after the game's been released, you'll be walking in San Francisco's Sunset district and you'll see a proper Frog City sign hanging in front of that glass storefront and you'll think, 'Hey, aren't those the guys who did *Tropico 2*?' ●

"Ted was making the torture pirate, so I asked, 'Can you make him funny?'"

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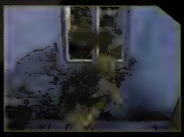

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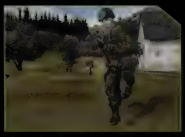

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EVERYONE'S

GAME WRITING 101: THE FAST TRACK TO ENTERTAINING POVERTY

This is the fourth part of a continuing series of articles about breaking into the game industry. While past articles focused on the folks that create the games, we received many requests to cover the editorial side of the industry. While we initially felt this would be too close to a "Look at us, our job is cool!" exercise in self-indulgence, the number of requests was impossible to ignore, so here goes.

Someone once said, "everyone's a critic," and regardless of the statement's original context, it has become some grand universal truth, particularly when applied to the world of entertainment, and more specifically, computer gaming. Gamers are a vocal bunch, and aren't particularly shy about sharing their opinions with any and everyone. For every hundred incoherent message and bulletin board rants that manage to prove only the general cluelessness of the original poster, there are a few (okay, three) reasonable, intelligent, hard-hitting, insightful, thought-provoking, cutting, biting, clawing, scratching, slam-over-the-head kinds of articles/forum posts/e-mails, etc. that make a series of terrific points or offer up an entertaining and informative analysis of a game. One day, it may occur to these authors that someone might actually pay for this type of analysis. And since we generally consider earning money a very good thing, it's time to enter the oh-so wacky world of game journalism.

Deciding you're interested in writing about games is the easy part, but you might need to take a step back and realize one thing: in all likelihood, you're going to fail. There are literally a few dozen full-time editorial positions available in the United States, and a similar number of people who receive enough regular work to call themselves full-time game journalists. It isn't particularly hard to get famous, or at least notorious, as a critic or writer, particularly online (just be weird), but the chances of transferring that success into a living are somewhere between slim and the sales figures for *Daikatana*. If you're good, you might make a few bucks that will help feed your game and hardware habit, or have some fun working on your own or someone else's website. It all depends on your level of talent, commitment, and persistence—plus a large measure of luck.

> "My work number is not listed anywhere, so if anyone actually calls me, I'd think that person was some sort of psycho stalker, and I'd wonder how he or she got my number."
>
> DAN "SHOE" HSU, Editor-in-Chief of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*

GIBBING THE MYTHS

It's not just about free games and free booze, the broads and/or studs… well, the booze is often free because companies try to liquor you up hoping that you'll think (and write) nice things about them. And you do get free games, which only guarantees that you'll have a copy of *Dig Dug Deeper* to dazzle your friends and relatives. Who wouldn't want a job where you sit around all day playing games and writing an occasional article, right?

Well… no one who has ever done anything else in their life would say writing about games is as difficult a job as being a brain surgeon or managing an army of surly teenagers at a McDonalds, but there's a common perception that it's all about playing games. "Yes, I do play games for work some of the time, and it's great," says Dan "Shoe" Hsu, Editor-in-Chief of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, "but by no means is that 'all' I do." Anyone working full-time still has to handle the boring day-in, day-out paper work, bureaucracy, and people management, just like any other management-level job.

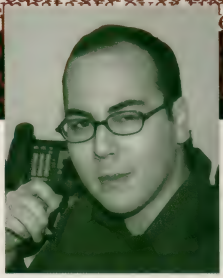
Greg Kasavin, Executive Editor of *GameSpot PC*, says he does all of his gaming at home during off-hours. "My work computer is hardly capable of playing any contemporary computer game," he says, noting this would be considerably more embarrassing if he could actually find time to play games during the day.

Playing games at home and at work brings up one issue for anyone considering working in the press—blurring the line between work and home life. For anyone writing about games, playing and reviewing them is a major part of your job, and as both Kasavin and Hsu note, if you accept this activity as work, their average workweek can run nearly 100 hours.

GETTING STARTED

Your first decision will be whether you want to contribute to publications on a freelance

A CRITIC



GREG KASAVIN, Executive Editor of *GameSpot PC*

basis, accepting assignments or pitching your own stories, or try to score a full-time gig. While freelance work can translate to a full-time position, Kasavin feels that having actual work experience doesn't necessarily amount to much. "Many of the most talented writers and editors I've had a chance to work with have had no previous professional experience," he says.

Hsu, who started with *EGM* in 1996 as an Associate Editor, moved through the ranks and on to other Ziff Davis publications, to a position at Gamers.com as their Video Games Editor-in-Chief in 2000, and finally returned to *EGM* in 2001, says networking is as critical in the editorial business as it is in most fields. "We get a lot of referrals from the existing staff," he says, though *EGM* still gets many resumes even when there are no positions available. "If a particular cover letter catches our eye, we may put that person on our radar."

As with most jobs, a college degree is important, even if it's in journalism or English. (If your interests lie in the console world, Hsu suggests learning Japanese.) "The experience—perhaps not the classes themselves, but the act of having to do the work—has definitely helped me in my career," says Kasavin, who has a degree in English from UC Berkeley. Experiencing something outside of games and *The Simpsons* also gives you a broader perspective, and therefore makes you more valuable as an employee, and more importantly, helps make you a better writer.

Aside from schooling, there's also the matter of persistence and commitment. "I would say [it's] about 70 percent chutzpah, 15 percent timing and 15 percent talent," says Marc Saltzman, currently a full-time freelance writer for publications like *EGM*, *PC Gamer*, *USA Today*, *Playboy*, *Maxim*, *Modern Maturity* (clearly big *Duke Nukem* fans), and the author of seven books related to gaming. (He notes the 15 percent talent won't keep you around for very long.) "You've got to have *cojones*. Don't be afraid of rejection. There is no such thing as open doors... you've got to break them down."

Saltzman wouldn't recommend anyone quit their day job before attempting a career in writing, as you need to be prepared to not make any money for a year or more as you establish a reputation and get experience. "Relationships are key. Know your craft. Be professional. Think big. Straddle the fine line between annoyance and persistence."

WORK NAKED

So a full-time job may not be your thing. The hours suck, you don't get to play games all day, you have to deal with fellow gamers both on staff and via feedback... how about becoming a full-time freelancer? There are obvious advantages: Work at home! In your underwear! Or less! You can do a lot of work at once, make a lot of money, take a few weeks off here and there... everything is great, right?

Not so fast, Sparky. Freelancing is a risky business: you're trading security for potential rewards. "[It's] a gamble," admits Saltzman, and it's a risk he's been willing to take for the last six years. "If you've got the drive, and can diversify in content (not just reviews but news, features, etc.), and mediums (magazines, websites, newspapers, books, TV, radio, seminars, consulting gigs, etc.) you can make a pretty penny." He does offer one bit of advice for anyone considering this path. "Many writers fall victim to the Oprah-and-bonbon syndrome...some people need discipline, that watchful eye over your shoulder... [but] if you love what you do and are motivated to get up early, research, write and file your stories on time, this may be for you."

GameSpot uses freelance writers, and Kasavin says he looks for many of the same qualities in a freelance writer as he does a full-time employee "I'm more impressed by someone with a college degree in a writing-related field than by someone who's played a lot of games." *EGM* also uses freelancers, though Hsu often goes with experienced writers. "We tend to use people that are already in the industry so we don't have to spend the energy to break in a newbie," he says. "On the flip side, newbies can sometimes offer a new, refreshing style of writing."

As Kasavin notes, freelancers shoulder the burden of keeping their machines up to date. In the console world, it's even tougher. As Hsu points out, a store-bought PlayStation 2, Xbox or GameCube will not play beta software, so you need special "debug" equipment that comes directly from the console makers. In the case of his publication, freelancers either have to play the games in their offices (in Illinois and California) or be established enough with the hardware makers to secure the debug units.

> "Many of the most talented writers and editors I've had a chance to work with have had no previous professional experience."

SAMPLING THE FRUITS

Whether applying for a full-time position or deciding to try your hand at freelancing, you need writing samples. Gaming websites, or your own personal one, are terrific places to hone your craft and get some experience. You

BY STEVE BAUMAN

need to be critical and comprehensive, informative and entertaining, and able to distill complex elements into simple language with restrictive word counts. Anyone can cover every part of a game in 5000 words, but try doing it in 500. "Patience, hard work, and constantly trying to improve are the things that have brought me as far as I've gone in this industry," says Kasavin. "Contrary to what it may seem like, I firmly believe that this is not an industry for lazy people."

When preparing actual samples, you'll want to check with the publication to see how they prefer them delivered. Saltzman prepares everything he thinks they'll need from him in advance. Hsu likes a portfolio of samples sent with an inquiry because it saves him the step of requesting them, and he prefers everything digital. Hard copies of articles grab Kasavin's attention more than links, and almost all editors want to see original works rather than just those that appear on sites or in publications to better gauge the writer's ability (as opposed to that of their editor).

Unfortunately, all of this assumes you can actually get in touch with an editor. "I dislike cold calls," says Kasavin. "E-mail is a safe way to contact me, though I'm not good about responding to solicitations for work. The fact is, I'm solicited for work frequently, and I currently have no room to accept any additional contributors." Hsu also prefers e-mails, but don't try calling him on the phone. "My work number is not listed anywhere, so if anyone actually calls me, I'd think that person was some sort of psycho stalker, and I'd wonder how he or she got my number."

Saltzman recommends people follow-up with editors, but reminds people to remain polite. "Your job, should you be hired, is to make the editor's life as easy as possible where they can depend on you for good articles and submitted in a timely fashion...if you give an editor stress, he'll cut you off, baby...."

EDITING AND TONE

Once you have a few samples, you need to evaluate publications to determine their tone and style. Once you've done that, consider submitting samples that match the publication. For example, when Saltzman pitched *Maxim* for an article, he submitted some articles he wrote for *Playboy*. "I try very hard to match the rest of the tone, pace and lingo as seen in the rest of the newspaper, magazine or Web site," he says. "This will ultimately help sharpen your skills as a writer, too."

Most publications hand over awful, long-winded, and boring documents called "Writer Guidelines" which, in theory, lay out exactly what a publication expects from its writers in order to keep them from being cut and pasted into oblivion. "Sometimes I see my work almost completely unedited when it hits the stands, which is a good feeling since the editor obviously felt it was what he or she was after," says Saltzman. "Other times it seems very different, which is upsetting because my goal is to make the editor's life easy and not complicated. If this is the case, I read the way it was edited and try to match the style a bit more the next time around."

"I expect a lot from writers," admits Kasavin. "However, these expectations are made clear up front, and if these expectations are met, then the writer should find that his work isn't seriously modified." This may sound like it limits a writer's freedom, but Kasavin disagrees, saying they give a writer the ability to customize the article to suit the needs and style of the publication. Hsu seems slightly more relaxed about style, saying that as long as the article is technically strong and conveys the basic information about a game, he allows writers almost unlimited freedom for creative expression. The bottom line is that the editor's word is law—you can choose to play by their rules, or not play at all.

FINAL ADVICE

Richard Corliss, the noted film critic for *Time Magazine*, gave the following good advice in an otherwise condescending editorial titled, "On the Web, Everyone's a Critic—a Bad One" (published, ironically, only on *Time*'s website), "An opinion is the easiest, and least crucial, part of a review. ... Good critics ... challenge and surprise with each sentence... [they] shouldn't try making the film they review a must-see; they should make their writing a must-read."

There are few of this class of writers in existence, and as long as readers demand quality, computer gaming is as worthy of this level of evaluation as any other form of pop-culture. If you're willing to accept the challenges, suffer through the humiliations, accept that you're probably not going to get rich doing it, and if you're capable of delivering this type of analysis, the industry wants and needs more people like you.

If you're ready to take the plunge, here are a few general words of advice. Never forget that credibility is considerably easier to lose than to gain, and the public has an incredibly long memory, particularly when you screw up. And screw up you will; most people that have been doing this long enough have said enough stupid things to fill a novel, or at least a novella. Or a really long short story.

Anyone getting into game writing as a shortcut to making games should probably consider the methods detailed in past editions of this series of articles. If the people you're writing about are those you wish to eventually work for, there's a chance your writing will reflect it. As legendary rock critic Lester Bangs says in the movie *Almost Famous*, "You have to make your reputation on being honest and unmerciful. Be confident in your own opinions, and never forget that that one's heroes are not immune to criticism." Words to live by. ●

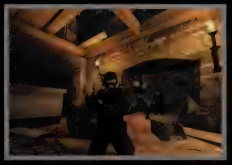
"Don't be afraid of rejection. There is no such thing as open doors... you've got to break them down."

MARC SALTZMAN, a full-time freelance writer for publications like *EGM*, *PC Gamer*, *USA Today*

"Dad, where is Afghanistan?"

"Level 4, son."

TACTICAL OPS
ASSAULT ON TERROR



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HAMEHAM

MICROPROSE

TECHNICALITIES

our computers are molting

Time to lose a little dead weight

When I leave town, I usually leave the TV on so it doesn't look like my apartment is totally unoccupied. The channel of choice is Animal Planet, because if my cat is going to be the only one watching, it might as well be something he likes. When I got back from Christmas vacation this year, I was greeted to the oh-so-pleasant sight of a rather large snake scraping itself against some twigs, pulling off old dead skin to reveal a bigger, badder, and quite slimy new snake underneath.

Because I'm dumb, it took a several weeks for me to make the connection but this is exactly what's starting to happen to computers. Oh sure, computers evolve constantly, but it's been quite a few years since they've changed as dramatically as they will in the next year or so. Hopefully, the computers we buy in the summer of 2003 will be significantly different from those we buy today, and not just cosmetically.

For mainstream computers, we're already starting to see an emphasis on style that just hasn't been common in the PC world. Slim PCs with better cases and matching monitors and keyboards are the entry-level machines from companies like Dell. The transition to flat-panel LCD monitors has already begun, and they could certainly be *de rigueur* in 12 months. This worries me a little, since current LCD monitors have response-time problems that don't mesh well with fast action games. But new technologies are on the way to remedy that. There will also be an effort to get rid of as many cables as possible, and it can't come soon enough. Broadband is already common among gamers now, but will gain another six million users over the next year (and that's conservative).

Then we've got a myriad of "in the box" advances. Serial ATA will get rid of those big, ugly, accident-prone ribbon cables in your machine. Even low-end machines will have video cards supporting programmable pixel and vertex shaders. The floppy drive will disappear, finally. Every computer will be expected to have either a CD or DVD burner. Wireless networking and technologies like Bluetooth will help reduce that rat's-nest behind our machines—there's a Bluetooth printer on the market already, and I can't wait for keyboards and mice. Hard drives will get bigger and faster, RAM prices will continue to yo-yo but generally move down, and sound cards will get marginally cleaner, cheaper, and more sophisticated.

Our PCs are still ugly ducklings. Fast, sophisticated ugly ducklings, but not the beautiful swans they should be. The key to their transformation will be the transition away from boorish old legacy technologies in an embrace of the new stuff. Games have always been instrumental in making new technology mainstream, and this is what worries me. Do modern game developers and publishers have the vision to move forward? Or are they too concerned with losing potential customers with old computers? Five years ago, the risk involved in making a Triple-A game meant you could take more risks.

Right now, games support new technologies but do not exploit them, and that's the problem. Online games work better if you've got broadband, but they're not really made to use the higher bandwidth or always-on nature of that connection. 3D games run faster if you've got a GeForce 3 or Radeon 8500, and some even optionally use pixel or vertex shaders, but really they look just like they would on a regular two-year old GeForce card.

I'd like to see some game developers—not all, but a good share—start to say "screw the people with old computers." Instead of making me dig up the CD and stick it in my drive every time I play a game, why not take advantage of my always-on broadband connection? Give me the option to verify my CD key online when the game starts up, like many online games do, even if I'm playing an "offline" solo game. Make a game so graphically advanced that it won't even run on those "old" GeForce 2 Ultra cards. Make a 2D game with artwork for a fixed resolution of 1600x1200 instead of 800x600. Too much artwork? Ship it on DVD.

And that's all just the beginning. The computers of next year will follow a totally different paradigm from those of the past. They'll still be the same old PCs we know and love, but the emphasis will be on a connected digital world where we've got cell phones, PDAs, TV set-top boxes, and of course other computers all linked together. They're pushing the idea of everyone being a content author, with digital video editing, pervasive webcams, voice recognition, you name it. I'd like to see a game take advantage of all that. Is there a great game idea floating around out there that revolves around a CD burner?

In a way, *Majestic* was way ahead of its time. It was a good idea at its core: a game that takes advan-

TIP OF THE MONTH

The Expert Zone— If you're a Windows power-user, you'll definitely want to bookmark Microsoft's Windows XP Expert Zone. You'll find a good archive of user-submitted tips and tricks as well as message boards and newsgroups devoted to Windows XP and links to useful utilities and tools. It's not highly technical, so anyone curious about playing around with their new operating system should head to www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/expertzone/.

tage of the new connected way we use our computers. It was a really poor implementation of that idea, but the base concept is sound.

If publishers want to balk at the risk involved with exploiting new technology rather than just supporting it, let us recall the best-selling PC game of all time, *Myst*. It was about as high-end as you could get at the time. It required Windows, a video card that could run at 640x480 in 256 colors, and a CD-ROM drive. That was all bleeding-edge stuff. Because it truly exploited those new technologies instead of just supporting them to make an old-tech game a little better, it offered an experience the likes of which we hadn't ever seen before. People who didn't know games saw it, and they had to have it. It became the quintessential CD-ROM game, sold a lot of hardware, and ultimately was bundled with millions of upgrade kits.

The PC world is waiting for another *Myst* to shove us, kicking and screaming, into the next stage of computer evolution. With something like that, the bleeding edge can switch to mainstream faster than you can say "obsolescence." It's the branch we need to scrape the old skin off, and without it the molting could take several years. I don't know about you, but I want my bigger and badder snake *now!* ●

Q: I notice that there is a lot of confusion about video cards and DirectX 8 and 8.1. I have read posts by many people claiming that their card is a DX8 card just because the maker offers drivers that offer DX8 support. I was under the impression that only the ATI Radeon 8500 and the entire NVIDIA GeForce 3 line can handle all of the DX8 features. I have seen posts where people are screaming that their Radeon 7500 is fully DX8 feature rich card because the drivers say they offer DX8 support, yet if you visit the ATI web site even a two-year old card like the XPERT 2000 offers drivers with DX8 support. Just because the drivers say they offer DX8 support, it doesn't mean that the card can handle all of the DX-8 feature, right?

Daniel H.

A: You're right, Daniel. DirectX 8 support and DirectX 8 features are two different things entirely. This same problem came about with DirectX 7, but to a lesser degree. Marketing departments love to tout their products based on older technology as "DirectX 8 compliant" or "DirectX 8 compatible" because, well, they are. In the strictest sense, a Radeon 7500 or GeForce 2 is indeed DirectX 8 compatible, and games out there that use DirectX 8 will work on them. Besides, the last thing these companies want is for someone to avoid buying their budget card because their game says it requires DirectX 8 and the video card doesn't say it's a DirectX 8 card on the box, right?

But that's very different than having the new DirectX 8 features, pixel and vertex shaders. As you've said, only the GeForce 3 line and the Radeon 8500 support pixel and vertex shaders, and that's really the big new improvement that makes DirectX 8 special. So if a game uses DirectX 8 but doesn't use pixel or vertex shaders, those Radeon 7500 and GeForce 2 and even old TNT 2 cards will work just fine. And that's the situation we're in with most games now. But as new games start to appear that make liberal use of pixel and vertex shaders, they'll stop working on older hardware, or maybe run in a comparatively ugly "compatibility mode."

Typically, when we use the term "DirectX 8 card," we mean one with full pixel and vertex shader support. Anything less might as well be a DirectX 7 card, whether or not it has DX8 drivers.

Q: I owned an ATI card once and that's enough. Having to download a different driver for every game I played was enough to make me start smoking again. My Voodoo 5 is quickly reaching its limits in games I play so it is time I upgraded. With everyone from NVIDIA to Fisher Price making GeForce cards, which company has a proven track record for drivers? The Hercules series of cards is about the only one that I know of with excellent drivers.

Dallas H.

A: NVIDIA does not, in fact, make and sell GeForce cards. They only design chips and a reference design for graphics boards. The chips are manufactured by a semiconductor company in Taiwan, and NVIDIA sells them to video card makers, often bundled with memory. The quality of the drivers that most companies release is usually not an issue—NVIDIA releases "reference drivers" at their website, and most gamers with NVIDIA-based cards use those. Since almost all the card makers stick very closely to the reference design, the reference drivers almost always work great.

To get technical support for your video card, you'll probably have to use the drivers from the company that made it. So if you buy a Hercules card, you'll have to use Hercules drivers to get tech support. Even so, most of the drivers released these days are essentially just the NVIDIA reference drivers that have been re-branded.

The long and short of it is this: when it comes to recent NVIDIA-based graphics cards, they're nearly all the same hardware and the quality of the drivers is the same almost everywhere. And if they're not, you can just use the reference drivers. The only real consideration for most new NVIDIA cards should be price and the software bundle. I would recommend one of the less-expensive GeForce 3 cards, such as a GeForce 3 Ti 200, from a reputable brand like VisionTek or Hercules.

TECHBYTES

Trustworthy Computing – Since Bill Gates stepped down as CEO of Microsoft and decided to concentrate on his new job as Chief Software Architect, we've seen little in the way of aggressive new directives from him. Until now. A new mission for all software development, straight down from Gates himself and sent to the entire company in a memo, completely refocuses the company on security, stability, and privacy. The chosen term is "Trustworthy Computing," and it represents a major (and welcome) shift in Microsoft's software development.

"Trustworthy Computing is the highest priority for all the work we are doing. We must lead the industry to a whole new level of Trustworthiness in computing." That's allegedly the way Gates began the companywide memo, dated January 15th. It has since been widely circulated on the Internet. "Trustworthy Computing is computing that is as available, reliable and secure as electricity, water services and telephony," it says.

The new Trustworthy Computing initiative centers around three key aspects. First, availability: Microsoft says their systems should always be available when their customers need them. That means being fault tolerant, crash proof, and self-managing so that the user doesn't need to intervene every time any little thing goes wrong. Second, security. This is self explanatory, but the new emphasis on making Microsoft products and services unhackable is a breath of fresh air. Third, privacy. Users should be in control of how their data is used, and policies should be simply and clearly written. You should have control over your and your passive information.

Is this a major leap for Microsoft? Absolutely. And it couldn't be better news to the legion of Windows users that are fed up with crashes, instability, security flaws, obscure licenses and policies, etc.

Apparently, it's not just lip service. According to the IT magazine Government Computer News, Richard Purcell, director of the Microsoft's corporate computing office, announced at a privacy and data security summit in Washington this February that Microsoft has stopped writing any new code for an entire month to focus only on fixing bugs and security holes, likening the task to a "20-year spring cleaning." Purcell also noted that computing today is "unstable and unreliable" and that Microsoft chairman Bill Gates "is really annoyed by the incredible pain we put everyone through in computing." ●

Pulling Four G's

With no new DirectX, NVIDIA cranks up the speed with the GeForce 4

by Jason Cross

Those who follow the hardware scene may recall that NVIDIA's original GeForce 256 heralded in the release of DirectX 7, with features new to that version of Direct3D like hardware-accelerated transformation and lighting. The GeForce 2 was a new architecture, but added no major 3D features. Instead, it was designed to do everything the GeForce 256 did, only faster. Next came DirectX 8, and with it the GeForce 3 line, moving away from the hard-wired T&L unit of the past and toward the more flexible pixel and vertex shaders.

Now comes the GeForce 4, and with no new version of DirectX to exploit it mimics the impetus of the GeForce 2: do everything the last guy did, only faster.

Everything old is new again

It's not entirely accurate to say that the GeForce 4 line is exactly the same as the GeForce 3 line, only faster. True, there are no major new 3D features, but NVIDIA hasn't simply slapped a few tweaks and speed revisions on a GeForce 3 and christened it the GeForce 4. Under the hood, they've made some serious improvements.

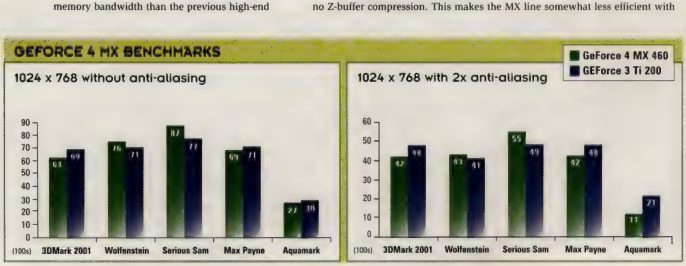
First, there are two major divisions in the new GeForce 4 line, with drastic differences. The GeForce 4 Ti series is based on the chip formerly known by the code-name NV25, and represents the new pinnacle of NVIDIA's technology. It comes in two speeds, a model 4600 that operates at a core clock speed of 300 MHz with 325 MHz DDR memory, and the 4400 with a 275 MHz clock speed for both the core and DDR memory. This gives the new high-end model a theoretical maximum of 25% more fill rate and 30% more memory bandwidth than the previous high-end model, the GeForce 3 Ti 500. It also has two vertex shader units to greatly speed up processing those polygons.

The chip known by the code-name NV17 has become the GeForce 4 MX, and is something of a half-breed. This line is made for mainstream computing and gamers on a budget, and is therefore much slower. The clock speeds are impressive enough, with a core speed of 300 MHz and 275 MHz DDR memory for the fastest 460 model, supplemented by a somewhat slower 440 model, and a significantly slower 420 model for especially inexpensive cards. The GeForce 4 MX has some nice new features, but it also lacks the ability to handle pixel shaders and features only two rendering pipelines instead of four. The clock speeds are high, but don't expect it to perform like similarly clocked GeForce 3 or GeForce 4 Ti cards. Think of it more as a replacement for the old high-end GeForce 2 line.

LMA II

When discussing the GeForce 4, there are essentially three terms to deal with, LMA II, nView, and Accuview anti-aliasing. The least obvious but perhaps most important feature of NVIDIA's new line deals with optimizations that allow it to save memory bandwidth. The GeForce 3 utilizes a set of bandwidth-saving features called the Lightspeed Memory Architecture, and LMA II is a refinement of that. For starters, it's more efficient at rejecting overdrawn pixels and compressing the Z-buffer. The GeForce 4 Ti cards include four distinct on-chip caches that can be immediately accessed by the chip without having to read or write to the card's main memory, and their efficient use is responsible for major speed gains.

The GeForce 4 MX line does not quite utilize all of the LMA II features found on its Titanium big brother, as there are only three smaller caches and no Z-buffer compression. This makes the MX line somewhat less efficient with

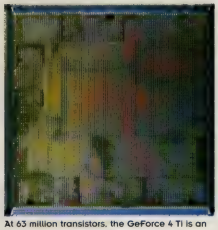


about using memory bandwidth, but it's an entirely different class of product and not really suitable for direct comparisons.

nView

In the past, NVIDIA-based cards haven't been particularly good at handling multiple displays. nView is their attempt to rectify the situation, and it's a major leap in the right direction. Essentially, it's a catch-all phrase for drastically improved hardware and software support for dual-display systems. The GeForce 4 MX is actually more advanced than the Ti in this respect, as it incorporates a video processing engine that decodes MPEG-2 signals as well as advanced scaling and de-interlacing features.

The nView software is really quite good, integrating virtually all the features you'd expect from a good dual-display video card. You can clone your desktop to any second display, span your desktop horizontally or vertically, prevent windows from splitting between displays, make windows transparent when you drag them around, work on multiple virtual desktops, run video overlays in full-screen mode on a second display, etc. It's not leaps and bounds above the best from ATI or Matrox, but it's a major step in the right direction and essentially makes NVIDIA a serious contender in multi-display technology. If you use a second display—a TV, an LCD monitor, or a CRT—you'll be thrilled with the capabilities of the new GeForce line.



At 63 million transistors, the GeForce 4 Ti is an enormously complex chip.

Accuview Anti-aliasing

Anti-aliasing technology has taken center stage in video cards lately, and why not? The latest high-end cards are so much faster than even the most demanding games require, so it make sense to burn a little of that extra speed on something to improve image quality. Accuview Anti-aliasing is a new marketing term NVIDIA dreamed up to let the world know that they've tweaked the location of sub-pixel samples for a little less distortion and better overall image quality. If that last sentence was Greek to you, the basic translation is "anti-aliasing looks a little better than before." A new 4XS mode, currently limited to Direct3D, really improves image quality over 4X mode with only a modest additional speed penalty.

More important is that the improvements in LMA II, along with wider internal data paths, make anti-aliasing much faster than it used to be. For instance, since the GeForce 4 Ti 4600 only has about a 25-30% speed advantage over a GeForce 3 Ti 500 when comparing fill rate or memory bandwidth, you could realistically expect frame rates only about 20% better. But with anti-aliasing enabled, it's often as much as 40-80% or more. The story is a little different with the GeForce 4 MX, which suffers a speed penalty for anti-aliasing similar to the GeForce 3.

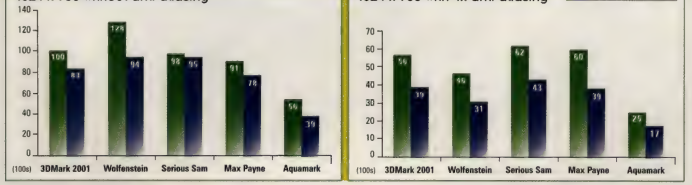
Benchmark city

After running literally hundreds of benchmarks at every resolution from 640x480 up to 1600x1200, with and without various modes of anti-aliasing, to find out just where the new cards excel and where they don't, here's what we found. The GeForce 4 Ti 4600 is a little faster than the GeForce 3 Ti 500 without anti-aliasing, but turn it on and it breaks way out in the lead. Truly this is a card that is meant to have AA enabled all the time—just set it and forget it. This is the main reason why the Ti cards will come equipped with 128 MB of RAM—turn on 4X AA at high resolutions, and you can eat up a lot of video card memory. It's even fast enough to use advanced anisotropic filtering modes, which can seriously improve visual quality (see "Better filtering = better graphics").

Cards based on the GeForce 4 MX 460, fastest of that line, are about equal in price to most GeForce 3 Ti 200 cards. Depending on the game tested, it is either a little faster or a little slower, and enabling anti-aliasing only magnifies the difference a little. Some future games that make use of pixel shaders or many layers of textures will be a good deal faster on a GeForce 3 card, as the *AquaNox* benchmark demonstrates.

To spend or not to spend

All the technical explanations in the world won't tell you if you should go buy one of these cards or not. Well, if you just laid down the dough for any GeForce 3 video card, there's no need to upgrade just yet. The GeForce 4 Ti 4600 and 4400 are for the gamer who has to have the fastest thing out there, cost be damned. They're extremely expensive ($300



and up for most models) and certainly far faster than any game will need for some time yet. With DirectX 9 just around the bend, it might not even be a great investment in the future. The nice thing about the Ti line is it gives you the speed to turn on features like anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering all the time.

The GeForce 4 MX line is for the gamer that needs to run today's games at a decent speed and wants to spend a lot less than $200. Avoid cards based on the very slow GeForce 4 MX 420 and stick with the 440 or 460. If all you care about is game speed, pick up a GeForce 3 Ti 200. All told, it's just as fast and with pixel shader support, a little more obsolescence-proof. But if you want to run TV-out or two monitors, the greatly improved capabilities of nView tilt the scale back in the GeForce 4 MX's favor.

With DirectX hanging at version 8.1 for longer than usual, this is an odd time to release a video card, as there are no major new 3D features to exploit. It's good to see NVIDIA take this opportunity to address issues of visual quality and multi-display support, but that doesn't necessarily mean you should run right out and upgrade. If prices drop, the GeForce 4 Ti could be a great buy (as the GeForce 2 was), but with DirectX 9 right around the corner, only those that have to have the very fastest should upgrade immediately. ●

Better filtering = better graphics

One of the nice things about the new high-end GeForce 4 Ti line is that it has the speed to turn on—and leave on—features that improve image quality, like anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering. "Aniso-what," you say? Anisotropic filtering is a means to make textures look better.

Basically, it works like this. In a 3D scene, textures on things in the distance are replaced by smaller, less-detailed textures called mip-maps. The greater the distance, the smaller the texture. With standard *bilinear* texture filtering, the textures are smoothed out, but you can see a noticeable break where the resolution of the textures change to the smaller mip-map(1). *Trilinear* filtering eliminates this break by blending together the mip-maps(2). That's a great start, but surfaces at an angle to the camera lose detail and look blurry with either of these methods. *Anisotropic* filtering restores this detail by reading in more texture data for each pixel drawn and applying it based on the angle of the surface to the camera (3). High degrees of anisotropic filtering can also reduce texture shimmering and moiré patterns in textures with regular, "noisy" patterns like stone or wood planks.

You can enable anisotropic filtering in GeForce cards with a drop-down menu in the OpenGL Settings tab of your advanced display properties panel, but to make it work in Direct3D requires a registry hack or a game that can enable it directly like *Max Payne*. NVIDIA assures us that an upcoming driver release will feature a "texture detail" slider in the anti-aliasing menu to adjust anisotropic filtering quality in both Direct3D and OpenGL.

Let's examine how filtering modes affect this scene from Return to Castle Wolfenstein. 1) bilinear texture filtering. 2) trilinear texture filtering. 3) anisotropic texture filtering

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RAVEN SOFTWARE

LUCAS Arts

Hercules XPS 510

You get what you pay for

RATING ★★½☆☆

MANUFACTURER Hercules [www.hercules.com] **MSRP** $89.99

Hercules has entered the speaker market with their XPS line, budget speakers targeted at entertainment enthusiasts. The high end of the line is a 5.1 set that costs only $90, which you have to admit is a good deal. Or it would be a good deal, if they were good speakers. The 20-watt subwoofer predictably lacks punch, and the 8-watt satellites don't really handle the mid and high-range sounds that well. It doesn't help that the subwoofer basically has to sit on your desk and suck up precious space, as that's where the power switch, volume, and bass level controls are located.

The speakers *work*, and that's a start. For $90, it's amazing you can get a six-speaker set at all. But if you're going to spend this much on PC speakers, you're better off foregoing any sort of surround setup and investing in a better-sounding 2.1 system. The XPS 510s are probably about as good as a 5.1 system can get for $90, but that's not saying much. —*Jason Cross*

Philips MMS306

Remote control is good. As an option.

RATING ★★★½☆

MANUFACTURER Philips [www.philips.com] **MSRP** $199.99

Philips is perhaps not very well known for PC audio, but their Acousitc Edge sound card has gathered critical praise and they're starting to do some interesting things with PC speakers. One good example is the 5.1 flat-panel MMS306 speakers, a $200 100-watt package that will certainly get them noticed. It features a 50-watt subwoofer (composed of two 25-watt speakers in their patented WOOX configuration) and five 10-watt flat satellites. The sound is decent, though not quite as powerful as you'd expect from a $200 speaker set. Fortunately, the extremely compact subwoofer manages to do its job very well, and the highly directional nature of flat-panel speakers somewhat enhances 3D positional audio in games.

Unfortunately, some usability problems really get in the way. 5.1 input is limited to a 9-pin DIN, while 4-channel sound is input via two 1/8" jacks. Why not include a third 1/8" jack for the more common 5.1 sound card output? There's an infrared remote to adjust the volume, but that's the *only* means of doing so, and you can't tell how close to full volume (or full bass/treble) you are. The cheap plasticy feel of the satellites doesn't help much, either. It's most important that these speakers sound pretty good, but style isn't everything. —*JC*

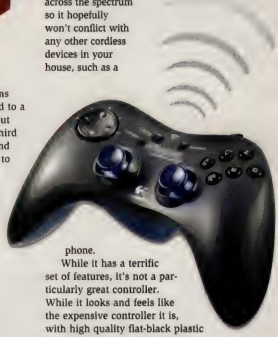
Logitech Wingman Cordless Rumblepad

Great set of features, not so great ergonomics

RATING ★★★☆☆

MANUFACTURER Logitech [www.logitech] **MSRP** $49.95

Going wireless is a good idea for a game controller, and in addition to letting you sit across the room to play *Madden*, Logitech's beefy USB Wingman Cordless Rumblepad also offers rumble effects and a dual-analog sticks. It uses a 2.4GHz transmitter, and auto-switches channels across the spectrum so it hopefully won't conflict with any other cordless devices in your house, such as a phone.



While it has a terrific set of features, it's not a particularly great controller. While it looks and feels like the expensive controller it is, with high quality flat-black plastic finish, it is wide and ungainly, putting your hands at slightly weird angles. The directional pad is mushy, the twin analog sticks have little resistance, the cheap plastic throttle slider is too close to the shoulder buttons, plus the buttons on the face, while having a good feel, are awfully close together. With its heavy plastic and four AA batteries (which are included, and actually are Duracells), it's also quite heavy. The rumble features work fine, and there's none of the lag from input you might expect from a cordless device.

As with most controllers, issues with design and ergonomics are more of a matter of personal taste, so give it a try before dismissing it entirely. However, despite the quality of its individual features, it's hard to recommend this gamepad over others currently out there. —*Steve Bauman*

Logitech MOMO Force

Because some things are worth the extra bucks

RATING ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER Logitech [www.logitech.com] **MSRP** $199

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

You really have to respect a force-feedback steering wheel that ships with optional racing stripes. They make the forces stronger and the action smoother, much like racing stripes make your car go a lot faster. That the wheel in question, Logitech's MOMO Force, doesn't actually need the additional visual oomph is merely icing on the proverbial cake, or maybe it's the intercooler for the turbocharger, to completely mix (bad) metaphors.

If you're a fan of aftermarket car parts or racing—and if you're thinking about $200 steering wheels, chances are pretty good that you are—you've probably heard of MOMO steering wheels. The USB MOMO Force includes an excellent, and small, F1-sized leather-wrapped MOMO-branded wheel with ideal spoke placement and a great feel. That alone would add some extra cost to a standard wheel, but Logitech has really gone all out to produce a high-quality product. The wheel unit includes steel paddle shifters (that move with the wheel) and excellent, strong force effects. The only curiosity is that it never sits at dead center when not in use. However, once in play, it does return to the center and doesn't require you to make constant corrections.

The MOMO Force also comes with a superb set of aluminum pedals, which have good action and don't slip easily. There's even a dead pedal for those long NASCAR races.

Other force-feedback wheels can be found for less money (and there are few for hard-core racers that are even pricier), but few regular controllers match the MOMO Force in the quality of its features. —*SB*

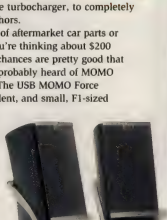
Altec Lansing 641

Not quite Klipsch-like

RATING ★★★★☆

MANUFACTURER Altec Lansing [www.altecmm.com] **MSRP** $299.99

Klipsch's ProMedia 4.1 speakers are the best speakers in this price range, and Altec Lansing's identically priced 4.1 speakers give them a run for their money, but can't quite dethrone the king. It's listed as a 400-watt system, but that's "peak value." The more common "RMS" measurement is 200 watts, which is still enough to annoy the neighbors and cause short-term hearing damage in a typical PC speaker arrangement. The gigantic subwoofer (it's the size of a large PC case) puts out plenty of bass with good kick, and the satellites deliver rich mid-tones and pretty crisp highs. Not quite as sharp and distinct as the ProMedias, but close.



A wired remote, which curiously comes with a separate metal stand, adjusts volume, bass, and treble, and can switch the speakers from stereo to four-channel mode or mirror a stereo signal to the rear channels. Fortunately, it also sports a headphone jack on top.

These are really quite good speakers, and quite expensive as well. But Klipsch's 4.1 speakers cost the same, sound marginally better, and include a 1/8" stereo input jack in addition to the headphone output. These are good 4.1 speakers, but not the best $300 can buy. —*JC*

Creative Inspire 5.1 5300

Where's the bass?

RATING ★★★½☆

MANUFACTURER Creative Labs [www.creative.com] **MSRP** $99

At $99, it's hard to expect too much out of Creative's speakers. Surprisingly, the mid and high-range sound is significantly better. Just as important, the subwoofer can be moved off the desk, and the power, volume, and even front/rear fade can be adjusted with a wired remote unit. The 6-watt satellites aren't going to bring down the house, but they're clear and have surprisingly good range for the price.

The subwoofer needs some serious help, though. At only 18 watts, you can't expect much, but it's disappointing even so. You'd expect the bass to be unresponsive and a little dull, but it's also just far too quiet.

We had to drastically overcompensate by cranking the low-end sound via the sound card's equalizer.

Again, you wouldn't have high hopes for a six-speaker set that costs $100, and Creative delivers about what you'd expect. The mid-range sound is a bit better than expected and the bass is worse, but it's a decent package overall. In this price range, you're still better off getting a good three-speaker set.—*JC*

As you expand your influence, the map changes to reflect your control of the surrounding area.

Disciples II: Dark Prophecy

The epitome of solid, well-built turn based strategy

by Robert Mayer

GENRE Fantasy Strategy **DEVELOPER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM. 3D Accelerator with 8MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-4 Players; Internet, LAN, modem, hot-seat **ESRB** Teen

There's a place for cutting-edge innovation, and there's a place for solid, predictable execution. Strategy First's *Disciples II: Dark Prophecy* proudly stakes its claim to the latter, and delivers a satisfying, complete, and reassuringly familiar gaming experience. The game will rarely thrill you or amaze you, but it won't anger or bore you either. In a world of overblown and over-ambitious flops, it's a relatively conservative and effective success.

As sequels go, it's about as straightforward as you can get, carrying forward the setting, mechanics, aesthetic, and philosophy of the first game and adding more of almost everything. You still have the same four races (the Human Empire, the Dwarven Mountain Clans, the Undead Horde, and the Infernal Legion) and the same four types of heroes (thief, mage, warrior, explorer), but nearly every other aspect of the game offers more variety. There are more spells, more monsters, more unit types, more intelligent neutral parties, more tactical options, and more advancement opportunities. The result is a rather beefy, fulsome game with enough content to keep an inveterate strategy gamer happy for weeks.

The game is a minimalist take on *Heroes of Might and Magic*, where you create leaders, recruit combat units, and fight out your battles on tactical maps. Much of the experience involves roaming the map, fighting neutral creatures, liberating various magic items and goodies, and taking over cities. Unlike New World's games, however, here each leader commands a maximum of five other units, and units can gain experience and evolve into more effective powerful combatants over time. And unlike *Heroes* games (prior to *Heroes IV*, at least), your leaders take an active role in combat and are often your most effective units.

Though it gets a 3D-looking facelift, combat in the sequel remains essentially identical to that in the original *Disciples*. Battles are always between two stacks, and each stack is arrayed in two ranks; melee units can only attack from the front rank, and can only reach adjacent units in the rank directly in front of them. Some double-size units take up both front and a rear rank slot. The object is to protect your valuable rear rank, kill the enemy's most powerful units, and keep your own troops alive to gain experience at the end of the battle. There's no terrain in combat, though you can use up to two magic items if your hero has them equipped. There are a couple new commands, but essentially it's the same system as the original.

Each party has six slots, but some characters take up two. Note the expanded paper doll for equipping magic items.

The saga of the quest

Solo games come in two forms, stand-alone quests and campaigns, called sagas. Sagas link a series of quests together, but their structure

is both a boon and a bane to the game. You get to carry over a leader and five magic items from one quest to the next, but that's all you get to take—no combat units, no additional heroes, nada. What's more, though each quest in a saga has you commanding the same race from the same capital city, you start from scratch each time, with your capital lacking even the most basic structures. The result is a fantasy Groundhog Day of repetition, where each game you run through the same sequence of laboriously building up your capital to support an army capable of winning the quest. Of course, as one of the game's big draws is the ability to customize the advancement of your units by choosing between different upgrade paths, it's good that you can try different strategies in each new scenario. If more carried over, you'd be locked into choices you made in the first scenario, so it's something of a Catch-22.

You can only carry over one leader from quest to quest in a saga, so choose wisely.

Luckily, even repetition in *Disciples II* is usually entertaining. Occasionally you'll get the benefit of a higher-level unit to start out with, but usually you'll just recruit a basic force of level one units and head outside the gates to beat up on thieves, wolves, or goblins. You can also export your leaders to use in the quests, so it's possible with a lot of playing to promote a leader to truly impressive levels. And even if each game starts pretty much the same way, the choices you have to make, between different units and different upgrade paths, are always interesting.

Thanks to a flexible and remarkably comprehensive scenario editor, which you can use to create your own quests and sagas if you wish, quests can be fairly dynamic. Neutrals will attack you or offer their allegiance. Statues will heal, and events will trigger other events. The game's AI is solid, if predictable, and you have to walk a fine line between a small, highly upgraded force and a larger force of lesser quality. Each of the four sides has its strengths and weaknesses, and none seems truly overpowering. Summoning spells can sometimes strain a quest's scripts, if you summon a creature and trigger events before they are supposed to happen, but the game is robust enough to recover from most of these faux pas.

Dürer would be proud

The single most impressive thing about the game is its art, which is uniformly superb. The art design is consistent and rich, evoking the works of Albrecht Dürer and other early modern artists. It has a dark, almost Gothic feel to it, like something from Michael Moorcock's *Von Bek* novels on the 30 Years War. Static screens, menus, map graphics, and the animated characters in combat are all wonderfully done, and add immensely to the appeal of the game. One of the joys of advancing your units is getting to see the artwork for their next incarnation.

The sound is also good, both music and effects, adding to the game's atmosphere, and making up for weaknesses in the writing and story. This isn't a game where you care what happens to whom, but rather a game where you get wrapped up in the process of making things happen. And that ultimately is both its strength and its weakness. The turn-by-turn activity of playing *Disciples II* is entertaining and satisfying, yet in the end there's not that much purpose to it. The sagas drag on and on, each quest forcing you to repeat the things you did in the last before getting to the new stuff. Your leader grows ever more powerful ever so slowly, yet he's almost always coupled with inexperienced units that are always dying. Because you have to start over each quest, you rarely get to develop the higher-level spells or units, and in some ways the stand-alone battles are better than the epic sagas—at least there you know you're in for a one-shot deal.

[from top] The game uses a lot of graphic effects, especially for spells as in this combat between a Dwarven leader and the Undead Hordes. >>> Here, the Mountain Clans' Stone Ancestor duels a neutral Kraken. Some of the creatures are truly monstrous. >>> Combat is abstract and elegant, with a simple system of position, initiative, and different modes of attack.

If you're a fan of turn-based strategy, though, *Disciples II* belongs in your game collection. Despite its flaws it's a well-polished and extremely solid game, and one that you will not soon exhaust. It might well exhaust you, however, so it's best to play in short, intense bursts. Prolonged exposure will only dull the luster of what is actually a very fine game.

UPSIDE	Great art, entertaining game system, scads of gameplay
DOWNSIDE	Can get repetitive, some quests very difficult
RATING	★★★★½

If you build it, they will join. Members pay more for each round, and if they become Silver members, you can build celebrity houses. >>> There's nothing that says "Golf Course" more than a giant squid waterslide.

Sid Meier's SimGolf

A bogie on the 13th hole

by Steve Bauman

GENRE Golf Tycoon Simulator DEVELOPER Firaxis [www.firaxis.com] PUBLISHER EA Games [www.ea.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

Though it sounds a bit like the punchline to some lame gamer joke (like "What will the creator of *Civilization* begin working on after completing the next *Virtua Fighter*"), *Sid Meier's SimGolf* is serious in its attempt at making golf more Sid Meier-esque. That is to say, when fun conflicts with realism, fun wins, and pure playability (and replayability) is job one. To put it another way, it's more *RollerCoaster Tycoon* meets *Caddyshack* than a serious golf designer or simulation. Most real golf courses probably have less belching than you find in this game.

In a sense, *SimGolf* represents the merging of the sensibilities of Meier and *Sims* creator Will Wright. Rather than resulting in a mess similar to the Speilberg/Kubrick collaboration *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, this project makes perfect sense. Both designers focus on open-ended gameplay and overall fun factor, but Wright's games have more humor and pure... stuff, while Meier's historically have more strategic depth. And much like *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, it's easy to get caught up in *SimGolf*'s considerable charms, even if you're not particularly interested in golf. It takes the perfect stylistic approach, one that's very humorous and wacked-out yet backed by some solid data and physics—it's serious science and engineering made into a cartoon to better mask its seriousness.

The connection with *The Sims* goes beyond sharing a publisher; it borrows the look and feel of the interface, some music, and various other bits from Maxis's cash cow (Mortimer Goth even drops by to play a round or two). It's even designed for expansions, allowing you to choose "Theme Packs" that add more golfers and other features within the game.

You can customize your golf pro's sayings. The more profane they are, the funnier it is.

Get happy

At its core, *SimGolf* is still a course designer and management simulation. You build a course, make sure it has enough cool stuff to attract people to pay money to play, and watch the dough roll in (or in this case, the simoleans). Even on the harder skill levels, it's still a relatively easy game. That's not a criticism—it's easy to get lost in the game for hours at a time. Though it's easy to initially dismiss the game as shallow, its depth and detail emerges over time.

As with most *Tycoon*-style games, the key is to make people happy, in this case the golfers that flock to your virtual links. Visiting golfers have certain attributes, matching those from *The Sims*, but these mainly affect how they react to each other, not to the course itself. Their golf game is also rated, and building holes—using sound golf course design—to match those ratings is the key to making them happier and more likely to join your club.

Unless they hit it into the rough. Or under a tree. Or into the drink. Or if they need a drink. Or food. Or if they get tired. Make the holes too easy and people get unhappy. Make it too hard and they're unhappy. If you don't have paths they're unhappy.

There's always tons of stuff going on while people are playing your course. >>> You can use landscaping to force players' shots in certain directions. The trick is to give better players ways to go over these objects.

If you don't have enough facilities they're unhappy. The key is to have a lot of cool stuff, and to make each hole look hard but play relatively easy, but more importantly they should give players interesting decisions ("Should I go left or right, short or long?"). You get immediate visual feedback (overall, the game looks great) whether or not golfers are intrigued by each hole, and there is also a chart that does a pretty good job of telling you how each type of golfer fares on each hole.

The sheer amount of tweaking you can do is perfect for control freaks, and the hole editor is incredibly simple to use. You can raise and lower terrain (finally, at no cost!) to create interesting hills, place trees, sandtraps, and scenic items that make people happy. You never get sick of your little players pointing at things and saying, "I am liking that Scenic Tree," and you can even edit your own golfer so he or she says things like, "That Scenic Tree doesn't suck."

Gary Golfin'

You create your own little Avatar, your Golf Pro (default name: Gary Golf), giving him or her some basic stats, and playing rounds causes your specific skills to increase (or decrease, after a particularly bad shot). Once you're sick with one particular course or have built it up to the maximum number of holes, you can take the Pro to another fresh plot of land, retaining his golf skills and bringing along your earned simoleans. After 50 years, the Pro retires and you'll need to create a new one from scratch.

You can also play your courses, a simple but surprisingly entertaining feature. It's not *Links*; making a shot requires no reflexes. There are six types, so it's really just strategic planning ("should I use backspin, or come in low?"). Your various skills determine the quality of each shot, with some luck thrown in, and putting is automatic once you reach the green.

You receive occasional challenges from other golfers to play for money, and you can enroll in big-money tournaments when your course meets certain SGA (Sim Golf Association) requirements. As with most of the better game designs, *SimGolf* is always dangling carrots in front of you to expand and improve your course.

Hire an exterminator

Unfortunately, bugs kill much of the fun. Some are merely cosmetic: black triangles in sand traps, a strange random lighthouse that appears from time to time, and various sorting problems that make some objects on the map appear on top of others. Some are annoying, like golfers that seem to lose their skills while moving to a new course, worker ranges that don't scale as you zoom in and out on the map, and facilities that, for no apparent reason, go "off the grid" of paths that connect them to your clubhouse. Reordering the holes on your course while people are playing causes all sorts of weirdness as players try to complete the hole they were playing on even if it's moved across the map (changing or removing a hole during a tournament also screws things up). Once your golfer hits his or her 50th year and is ready for retirement, there's no way to actually start another game without first quitting the game completely. Couldn't the game use up all the available names for the faux celebrities that take up residence on your course before repeating them? It's kind of weird to have "Britney Aguilera" move in next door to… "Britney Aguilera."

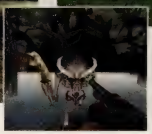
The King Bug is a reproducible direct-to-desktop crash bug that occurs every time you try to play a $500,000 tournament (this occurs when you hit 13 holes on your course). This bug breaks an entire portion of the game—playing tournaments is one of the best ways to make a lot of money. (Firaxis issued a patch addressing this problem a few days after the game appeared on shelves.) The sheer number of glitches shows something of a breakdown of quality control at Electronic Arts, Maxis and/or Firaxis. The game has a rushed and sloppy feel you normally don't get from any of their products.

Bummed out

Outside of the bugs and glitches, there are only minor quibbles with the game. Though the overall sound design is superb, it could use a bit more variation, as the existing sounds grow a wee-bit tiresome after a while. It could also use a bit more stuff (objects, landscapes), something the inevitable add-ons will likely deliver. More baffling, it ships with no pre-built courses to play on and learn from—a feature that might have made up for the useless manual (the website launched with downloadable courses).

When you add up all the little problems and multiply them by the big-time crash bug, but then divide by the sheer amount of smile-inducing fun the game still manages to deliver, you're faced with… the usual problem faced by far too many PC games. It's a virtual, and literal, bummer. *SimGolf* is a fantastic game, by far Meier's most playful project to date, marred by all-too typical PC game glitches. At least in its shipping state, it's impossible to hate but equally impossible to fully embrace.

UPSIDE	Way more fun than you might expect, superb visual feedback, lots of stuff to do, a control freak's dream
DOWNSIDE	More bugs than a Florida golf course in August
RATING	★★★½



(clockwise from left) Shooter enemies can't get any stranger than Cucurbito the Pumpkin. >>> A scene that didn't make it into Independence Day. >>> Seeing Eastern Europe on 500 rounds a day.

Serious Sam: The Second Encounter

Second verse, same as the first

by Brett Todd

GENRE First-Person Shooter DEVELOPER Croteam [www.croteam.com] PUBLISHER Take 2 Interactive [www.take2games.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

Croteam isn't going to raise any eyebrows with *Serious Sam: The Second Encounter*. All of the monsters are back for more. Your arsenal of weapons is augmented with just a couple of new devices. Massive wave assaults that feature hundreds of bug-eyed monsters, sometimes all on the screen at the same time, remain the order of the day. Yes, the sequel to 2001's *Serious Sam: The First Encounter* is every bit as unimaginative as its title.

And that's a great thing. In a time where most developers are tarting up their designs with ever-more extravagant scripted events and multiplayer modes that owe more to *Baldur's Gate* than *Quake*, it's good to know somebody remembers that shooters are supposed to be about killing bad guys with really big guns. That tenet was the sole focus of the original *Serious Sam* and it remains the sole focus of its sequel. But even though Croteam stuck to the basics, there are subtle enhancements in many areas. This is a slightly better game than its predecessor, though the improvements are in a "*Godfather* vs. *Godfather II*" vein.

The Second Encounter begins with Sam "Serious" Stone on a spaceship leaving the ancient Egyptian setting of the first game. Something funny happens on the way to the planet Sirius, however, and a crash-landing forces the vessel down in South America. Quicker than you can say "plot device," Sam is blasting the big uglies of chief bad guy Mental in the jungle of the ancient Mayans. From there, you'll move on to second and third acts in Gilgamesh's Babylon and medieval Poland. The dozen or so massive levels spread over three environments are very well realized and help to keep things fresh even when you're just blasting the same aliens over and over again. The Mayan city of Teotihuacan is filled with giant stone heads, stepped pyramids, and a jungle drum soundtrack. Babylonian Persepolis features ziggurats and colorful walls that boast paintings of rulers with those distinctive staircase beards. And Poland is all horror-movie castles and fog, right down to the organ music and woman screaming in the background.

Gameplay is almost identical to its predecessor. Level progression mirrors the original game, to the point where events take place in roughly the same order, in the same general situation. Certain areas arouse a sensation of déjà vu, particularly a lengthy enemy offensive outside the walls of Teotihuacan that is very similar to the Krell Skeleton onslaught outside the walls of Memphis. More traps and console-styled challenges break the monotony. Every section is dotted with jumping platforms, spike pits, and weird wind and gravity effects. Croteam also made the significant change of varying the attackers. This softens the repetition and makes play a little bit easier, although the latter stages of each section are still insanely difficult. Where the first game often featured crushing numbers of a single foe, *The Second Encounter* mixes things up. Instead of being gooned by a hundred Krell Skeletons, you'll be beset by maybe 50 of them, accompanied by a few Werebulls, a dozen Beheaded Kamikazes, and a few Scythian Witch-Harpies.

Those names should be familiar to *Serious Sam* veterans, because the lineup of villains here remains almost unchanged. The roster has been filled out with some interesting additions, though. Cucurbito the Pumpkin, a redneck in overalls with a jack-o-lantern head and a chainsaw, is easily the most interesting newbie, almost on a par with the infamous Headless Kamikaze. Others include the Yosemite Sam-like Zumbrian from Ras-ad-Nyk, the big red Fiendian Reptiloid Demon, and a series of alien troops that may have teleported in from *Unreal*. Weaponry has received the same minor touch-ups, though the new sniper rifle, chainsaw, and flamethrower add welcome new dimensions to play. The sniper rifle gives you the opportunity to whittle down enemy numbers from long range, while the powerful chainsaw and flamethrower give you more of a chance to emerge alive from a close-quarters scrap.

These refinements come together to make *Serious Sam: The Second Encounter* an even more entertaining game than its predecessor. Some might be a little put off by the absence of innovation, but this series is about pure arcade mayhem, not gaming evolution. Toss in some multiplayer additions such as the Seriously Warped third-party mod and the bargain $19.99 price and you've got a game that no first-person shooter fan should be without.

UPSIDE	Carnage, glorious carnage
DOWNSIDE	You might get bored at times, particularly if you played the first Serious Sam
RATING	★★★★½

Grandia II

A detailed example of what not to do when porting a game

by David Ryan Hunt

GENRE Role-playing DEVELOPER Game Arts [www.gamearts.com] PUBLISHER Ubi Soft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

With its release over a year ago, *Grandia II* became one of the major role-playing games available on the Dreamcast console. While it was by no means perfect, it offered a fun combat system and an interesting take on character development. An otherwise solid game and good graphics certainly didn't hurt.

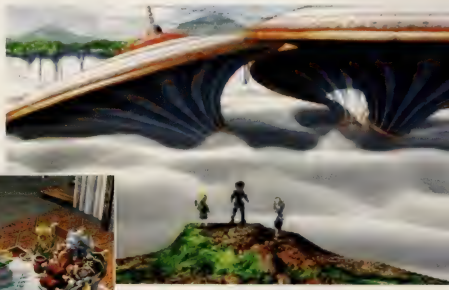
Grandia II's story offers nothing new to fans of console role-playing games. You play Ryudo, a Geohound (think mercenary) who ends up taking a job where he must ultimately battle to save the world. The plot is predictable (particularly or seasoned role-playing veterans), but solid enough to carry the game. Story isn't what this game is all about, anyway. Combat is where *Grandia II* shines.

Game Arts decided on a path that more console role-playing game developers should consider—no random battles. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to search an area and running into one fight after another when you just want to explore. There are monsters everywhere, but you can run past them most of the time, or check a remote path in a forest without running into three fights. When you end up crossing paths with a monster or boss, you're taken into a simple 3D battlefield on the spot. A gauge in the lower right corner of the screen displays when your characters and the monsters will next act. Once a command is chosen it does not happen immediately—your character must charge up his act timer, which requires varying amounts of time depending on what you are doing and your ability with that skill. Whenever a character takes damage, they move down the gauge and are forced to wait a little longer for their turn.

Timing becomes an important issue, because you can use a critical attack to interrupt an enemy in the process of charging their act timer, effectively canceling their turn. Of course, the enemy can do this to you as well. Characters run around on the battlefield and it is important to factor the distance to the target, along with any possible threats near you.

At the end of each fight you're rewarded the usual experience, gold, and items, as well as magic and skill coins. These coins are used to purchase skills from various sources. Skill coins are used to learn moves unique to a character and for special skill books. Magic coins are used to power up Mana Eggs. Each Mana Egg offers a selection of spells, unlocking more powerful spells as it increases in level and characters can only equip one Egg at a time (sometimes skill and magic coins have other uses, too). Each ability that you can learn ranges from level one to five. For instance, a skill book might have an ability that adds ten to your strength for each level that you buy. For skills and spells, it increases the power and decreases the wait period. It's a fun system, because there are always a few different ways to improve your characters and the rewards from combat are significant.

So what's the problem? *Grandia II* is over a year old now, so it's perfectly reasonable to expect the PC version to offer some improvements. It does, including support for higher resolutions and configurable controls.



(from top) The intro sequence briefly depicts an ancient battle between Granas (white) and Valmar (black). >>> The cut scenes look nice, but are too blurry up close. >>> Dinner conversations like this one can end in an infinite loop.

Unfortunately, altering the controls is somewhat problematic. Movement defaults to the arrow keys, and they also control menu navigation. If you change them to something different (the "WASD" keys, for instance), it breaks your menu controls.

Compare the graphics side by side to the Dreamcast, and the PC is inferior, sporting blurry cut scenes and jagged edges. Increase the resolution to fix the problem and the actual dialogue text lags severely during close zooms, making the game unplayable. Turn the volume up to hear the music and the blaring sound effects will rupture your eardrums. There is no way to adjust volume levels independently.

The list goes on. If you really want to play the game (and it's worth playing), you're better off buying a used Dreamcast and playing the original version of the game on that.

UPSIDE	It's like the Dreamcast Grandia II...
DOWNSIDE	...but worse in every way
RATING	★★½☆☆

EverQuest: Shadows of Luclin

The pressvan demonstrates an updated emote, perfect for after long raids. >>> Many NPCs have gotten the high polygon treatment. Scenes like this can slow some computers down.

Of equestrian events and memory requirements

by Chris Gardner

GENRE Online Role-playing DEVELOPER Verant Interactive [www.verant.com] PUBLISHER Sony Online Entertainment [www.station.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 256MB RAM, 3D Accelerator, Internet Connection MULTIPLAYER Online Game ESRB Teen

"I wish I had never found the ring..."

In a post *Asheron's Call/Anarchy Online/Dark Age of Camelot* world, massively multiplayer role-playing games have to try hard to make an impression. Expansion packs have to try even harder. New features must be balanced with the game's core mechanics to ensure that everyone (including people without the expansion) can feel like they're playing in the same world. *Shadows of Luclin* does a good job of balancing the needs of a variety of players, from newbies killing their first rats to veterans who have Norrath's maps (and all of their many updates) hanging in their dens.

The most obvious change in *Shadows of Luclin* is a completely revamped graphical engine, something *EverQuest* players have been clamoring for since the game's 1999 release (even then, the blocky and pixilated graphics seemed dated). Higher polygon counts make for more organic-looking surroundings and avatars, which include a new race—the cat-like Van Shir. More natural looking trees, mountains, and lighting add to the game's already epic vistas, and the ability to physically emote (your character visually moves their lips instead of just displaying the text message "Bart smiles") adds another layer to an already strong chat interface. The ability to change the game's interface through XML files also adds some welcome customization.

Unfortunately all of this comes at a price; that game has what may be the steepest system requirements ("I need *how* much RAM?") of any product in the history of computer gaming (at least today). Also, a broadband connection is practically a requirement, not only for patches (which, with the new engine, are of course much larger), but also for the warping and clipping that seem to occur more frequently now. *EverQuest* 1.5, as some players have taken to calling it, seems mostly designed for stronger future hardware.

Pretty landscapes aside, most of the game's core mechanics have not changed. This means the annoyances that were "fixed" in games such as *Dark Age of Camelot*—camping, never-ending raids, forced social grouping to attain levels, long mana reload times and corpse scavenging—are still a part of the game. Whether these issues are truly annoyances or merely a part of the *EverQuest* experience is largely a matter of personal taste. In Verant's defense, it's difficult to alter the core mechanics of an online game after it goes live. Just remember: if you stopped playing *EverQuest* because of these issues, you'll find no solution here.

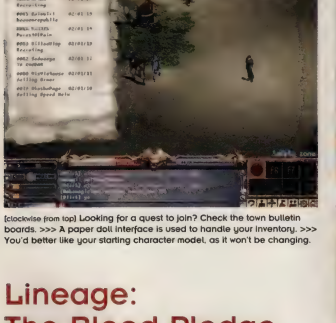
Sony did indulge in some experimentation with the higher levels—particularly 51-60—and the new Luclin zones. Here they added a multitude of new quests, as well as the ability to spend experience to further specialize in skills. This works wonders with the previously stale upper levels, allowing veterans to become uber-masters in their professions, or even change them entirely. Even after you have already seen much of the world, this skill-gathering mechanic helps keep you entertained.

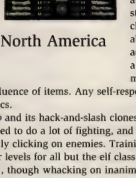
The game also features a more sensible gradation between good and evil areas, with much clearer-defined boundaries. One of the most common mistakes for newbies—accidentally walking into an enemy faction's zone and getting killed—happens a lot less frequently now because there are greater physical differences (lighting, for example) between areas.

One of the most-talked about new features in *Luclin*, riding horses, is actually more of a luxury than a necessity. Horses are like the limos of *EverQuest*: nothing beats striding into town on a tall steed while newbies look up from their spiderling kills in marked astonishment. Only higher-level players can afford them, and spells are still the quickest way to get around. Still, there is a certain level of prestige attached to owning a horse, much like owning a car in *Anarchy Online*. All you need are dark shades and the ability to roll the top down to complete the Tolkien celebrity illusion.

New *EverQuest* expansions have always been more about promise than progress. *Shadows of Luclin* offers some significant improvements right out of the gate, and that's a promising start.

UPSIDE	Beautiful graphical overhaul, many new areas and quests
DOWNSIDE	Requires an uber-computer
RATING	★★★★½





[clockwise from top] Looking for a quest to join? Check the town bulletin boards. >>> A paper doll interface is used to handle your inventory. >>> You'd better like your starting character model, as it won't be changing.

Lineage: The Blood Pledge

The biggest game in South Korea is a bust in North America

by Brett Todd

GENRE Online Role-playing DEVELOPER NCsoft Corporation [www.lineage-us.com] PUBLISHER NCsoft Corporation [www.lineage-us.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 128MB RAM, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER Online game ESRB Teen

Time travel is one of the most important illusions to create and maintain in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Nobody wants their sword-slashing, potion-quaffing, dragon-slaying adventures ruined by the intrusion of the modern world. "I'll take the garbage out later, honey, right now Grond the Unshaven has to beat up some elves and find the magical key to the golden gates of Phanazabland."

South Korean phenomenon *Lineage: The Blood Pledge* does a good job at transporting you to a bygone era every time that you play. The only problem is that this distant past seems a lot more like 1997 than the fantastic medieval land of swords and sorcery that you're probably expecting. Although the NCsoft product is presently the biggest online game in the world, with a full three million subscribers in the Pacific Rim, the game is as out of date as an Edsel when compared with North American Ferraris like *Dark Age of Camelot*, *EverQuest*, and even the decidedly creaky *Ultima Online*. Gameplay is simplistic, character development barely there, and the production values can't hold a candle to the original *Diablo*, let alone the 3D-accelerated splendor of today's best and brightest.

Lineage is sparse. There are just four classes available, and no selectable races. You can play a human knight, a human wizard, a human prince/princess, or an elf. Each class leaves little room for individual character development. The six traditional statistics—strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma—define each character's abilities and cannot be significantly adjusted. Armor class, hit points, and a regenerating mana points pool for magic are determined by these scores as well as by the influence of items. Any self-respecting dungeon master will recognize all of these basics.

Veterans of *Diablo* and its hack-and-slash clones will recognize everything else. To gain levels, you'll need to do a lot of fighting, and combat involves selecting a weapon or spell and repeatedly clicking on enemies. Training dummies are available to get through the first four levels for all but the elf class (elves have to earn experience points the hard way), though whacking on inanimate objects just reinforces the dreariness of the initial experience. Real combat offers no feedback. You're always in the dark with regards to enemy health. This is particular annoying if you want to take advantage of the unique wild animal training feature, since it requires that you subdue a targeted beastie by pounding it below a third of its starting hit points and then bribe it with meat. Since the first (and only) indication that the creature has suffered serious harm comes when it drops dead, it's almost impossible to pull this off. You'll either stop fighting too soon and get slain while hauling out the lamb chops, or push things too far and kill the damn thing. Thankfully, you can also buy animals.

Click enough times to gain a half-dozen levels and you can challenge tougher monsters, join up with player character parties and factions, and even take part in a "Blood Pledge" castle siege. Yet even if you get involved in some interesting diversions, the meat and potatoes of the experience is merely tiresome. New areas look the same as the old ones, onscreen text is always fuzzy and hard to read (the low resolution doesn't help), you can't scroll to see beyond the immediate vicinity, and the screen shudders with every movement, making the simple act of clicking on a foe difficult and eventually headache-inspiring. Also, your characters don't change with experience and new equipment, since there are only generic male and female models for each character class. Even worse, there is only one graphic for each weapon type. Meaning that a broadsword looks the same as a dagger when equipped, a battle-axe the same as a hand-axe, and so on.

If you have been wondering why so many South Koreans are so excited about this game… well, you'll still be wondering after you play it. Skip this one and spend the $15 monthly subscription fee elsewhere.

UPSIDE	Low standards and a three-year-old system? This is the game for you!
DOWNSIDE	You'd still probably bail out before the trial period ended
RATING	★★☆☆☆

Capitalism II

Greed is good

by Jeff Lackey

While this piece of real estate was expensive, its location returned the investment many times over.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

GENRE Business Simulation DEVELOPER Enlight Software [www.enlight.com] PUBLISHER Ubi Soft Entertainment [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-7 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

How do you design a business simulation that is complex, utilizes a sophisticated economic model, is accurate enough to be used in university business schools, and is a great, enjoyable game? Ask Trevor Chan, the designer behind *Capitalism II*, a game the belies the notion that business sims have to sacrifice reality in order to be fun.

While the trend in business games these days tends to be specialization (there's a *Tycoon* game for everything imaginable: *Car Tycoon, Casino Tycoon, Lava Lamp Tycoon*), *Capitalism II* displays remarkable breadth. If you'd like to open a department store in a bright, colorful depiction of downtown Atlanta and make a go selling a variety of products (such as cameras, toys, clothing, etc.) with the hopes of making enough money to create a chain of stores, you can do that. Or perhaps you'd like to become the computer king of the world, manufacturing your own systems and selling them through specialty stores around the world. You can even try to make a living raising livestock and selling their meat, milk, and hides. The game is filled with a plethora of such options, giving *Capitalism II* a lot of replayability and many strategic options. The ultimate challenge is to start small and wheel and deal your way up to Global Mogul, selling every type of product and owning everything from raw material sources to the factories to the retail stores to the media outlets on which you advertise. You can even dabble in real estate investments and the stock market on the side.

All of these options might lead you to think that the learning curve is steep and slippery. It would be, were it not for the slick interactive tutorials. This learning tool comes in the form of a campaign, with each scenario teaching different aspects of the game. By the time you complete these, you'll feel comfortable enough to jump into either the "Capitalist's Campaign" or the Custom game mode. The former allows you to select one of 5 scenarios, and then after successfully completing any of these you are presented with a new one, eventually revealing all of the campaign scenarios. The Custom game mode lets you set up an open scenario in which you can control almost every aspect of the competition, such as the goals, the strength of the competition, the economic environment, the types of markets available, and so on. You can also just hit the "random" button and play with whatever the computer selects. Again, the name of the game here is breadth of options.

While the breadth of *Capitalism II* is obvious from the first screen, even more impressive is the game's depth. Every aspect of the simulation has layers upon layers of interrelated variables. For some products (and there are a few dozen products available) the potential customers are more interested in price than anything else, so paying to establish a well-known label with which to differentiate your product is likely a waste of money. On the other hand, some items (such as jeans or colas) are heavily brand dependent. If you want to build an empire based on these products, you will need to coordinate heavy marketing campaigns and establish well-recognized brand names.

Even here there is yet another level: if you create a brand name for a range of products, such as apparel, and sell high quality products, that branding will give you a sales boost. But introduce a new product under the same brand name and let its quality slip, and customers' opinions of all of your products under that brand will drop. Another example is the stock market: you can ignore it if you like, but if you do decide to delve into that piece of the game you will be able to issue IPOs, develop mergers, attempt hostile take-overs, and much more.

Capitalism II is a lot like a great flight sim. At its heart is an extremely complex and realistic modeling of real life systems, ensuring the fidelity of the simulation. But it is configurable enough that novices can set it up for a relatively simple game, blissfully ignoring the powerful engine running underneath the interface. Those looking for a more intricate challenge can dig into all of the layers that the best business simulation on the market has to offer.

The beginnings of a retail computer dynasty. >>> Farm living is the life for me.

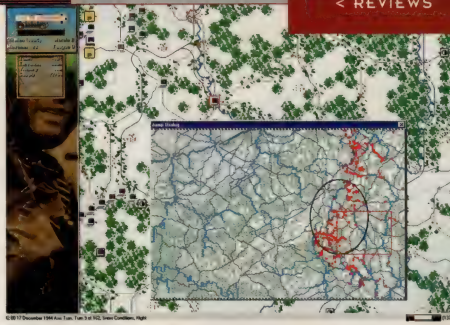
UPSIDE	Remarkable breadth and depth while still being accessible to the casual gamer
DOWNSIDE	Some interface screens need to be streamlined
RATING	★★★★½

Bulge '44

The best Panzer Campaigns game yet

by Scott Udell

GENRE War DEVELOPER John Tiller [fly.hiwaay.net/~tiller]
PUBLISHER HPS [www.hpssims.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2 Players; Hot-seat, Play-By-Email, Internet, LAN ESRB Not rated



You knew it would happen someday—designer John Tiller and the crew at HPS have finally taken the *Panzer Campaigns* to the Ardennes… and thank God they have, because in *Bulge '44* they've given us what may well be the best game of the series yet. That said, there's nothing revolutionarily new in *Bulge*—it's just that all the little steps Tiller has made with the engine, and the scenario design he and the rest of the team have put together to cover this particular battle, all combine to make an extremely good and playable game (something that hasn't always happened with this series).

The 3D counter view (left), introduced earlier in the series, is a blessing in Bulge because the 3D figure view (right) is useless in the snowy terrain. >>> (top) The "jump map" gives the best quick overview of the battle and, if you've got a unit selected, shows a rough footprint for that unit and its subordinates.

The game covers the famous late WW II battle (Dec. 17, 1944 to Jan. 2, 1945) in which the Germans attempted to drive a wedge between the Allies in an ultimately hopeless attempt to arrive at a negotiated settlement to the war in the West. The battle offered challenges to both sides, but they differed: the Germans had to push forward through crowded, twisted terrain before the Allies could respond and before their forces and supplies were exhausted, while the Americans had to hold on with very limited forces in the face of the initially powerful German onslaught. Perhaps it's the nature of the battle, or perhaps it's the balanced commingling of design elements, but turns out that *Bulge* does a good job of representing both sides of the battle—you'll experience a very different game playing as the Americans instead of the Germans, and vice versa.

As with previous *Panzer Campaigns* titles *Bulge* comes with a mixture of scenarios from small through medium on up to large. The largest of these scenarios are the four campaign scenarios (one historical and three alternates), hefty brutes of over 150 turns each. That might seem daunting, but it's really not, especially in comparison to some of the earlier games (indeed, the full-up map is almost smaller than many of the single battle maps in HPS' recently released Civil War game, *Campaign Corinth*). You'd think the slightly smaller map would lead to a very cramped game, but this time around the designers wisely chose to set the unit scale appropriately—you won't see humongous stacks of teeny units cluttering the landscape, something that makes a turn much more manageable.

There really aren't that many engine modifications in *Bulge* (at least not major ones). The game does represent German deception units, and does so in an elegant fashion. The unit highlighting and alternate color modes introduced in earlier games (plus the "footprint" marker seen in the jump map) somehow combine to make this the game where it's easiest to maintain unit cohesion. This is further aided by a combination of design factors (hex size, turn length, and most importantly, unit sizes) that make the scenarios—even the campaign scenarios—feel "just right," neither too bogged down with small units nor too light.

The only downer in the game (one shared by all the previous games) is that watching the AI turns can be very, very tedious. In the full campaign scenarios, even with the reports flashing by almost too quickly to read, an AI turn can take nearly 15 minute to execute on an 866 MHz machine. It would be nice to have an option to have the computer execute its turn or phase quickly, then present a summary of all the reports at the end, perhaps with map markers added.

Luckily, you'll quickly forget your frustration when your turn finally rolls around. You've read the history of the battle, you know the issues, now you get to experience them yourself. This isn't a wide-open battle like *Smolensk* or *Tobruk*, but neither is it the absolute quagmire that *Normandy* could become. The game captures the challenges both sides faced (especially the Germans) in a way that has you going, "Wow—so that's what it was like!" What more could you ask of a historical wargame?

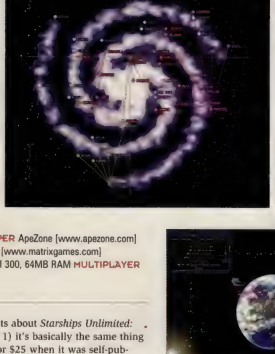
UPSIDE	Arguably the best of the series, wonderfully balanced, m… velously captures the "feel" of the fighting in the Ardenne…
DOWNSIDE	Watching AI turns can be very tedious, some map views useless
RATING	★★★★½

Starships Unlimited: Divided Galaxies

The game that'll have you asking "MOO who?"

by Tom Chick

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE



Nothing brightens the galaxy like a dash of new artwork in the background. >>> Those daring young aliens in their magnificent flying machines. >>> Although your friends and neighbors have new faces, they're still not very pretty.

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER ApeZone [www.apezone.com]
PUBLISHER Matrix Games [www.matrixgames.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Not Rated

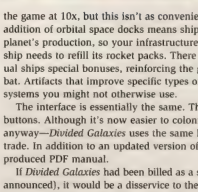
The two most salient facts about *Starships Unlimited: Divided Galaxies* are that 1) it's basically the same thing you could have bought for $25 when it was self-published last year and 2) it's still a damn fine game. *Starships Unlimited* is a game about the conquering space, but the emphasis is on researching technology, outfitting starships, and guiding them through detailed tactical combat. It offers all the epic space opera milieu of a game like *Master of Orion* but none of the micromanagement. It's the *Star Trek* model of sci-fi in which the adventures of your crew matter more than the tax rate of your home planet. The early game consists of exploring the galaxy to gather powerful artifacts—basically power-ups for your planets, ships, and scientists—before the other races get to them.

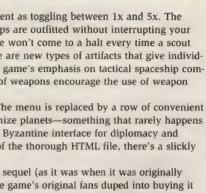
The economic model isn't about growing your population. Instead, you secure trade routes to other systems, where your starships will have to fend off pirates and hostile aliens. Although diplomacy is flexible, it isn't the complicated web you'll find in games like *Civilization III*. Instead, it's a means to assimilate other races and grow your empire. There's even a hearty espionage subgame that lets you spy on, steal from, and subvert your friends and enemies.

What sets *Divided Galaxies* apart from the original *Starships Unlimited* is a splash of artwork, a handful of refinements, and a higher price tag now that Matrix Games is publishing it. If you've never played *Starships Unlimited*, *Divided Galaxies* is well worth buying. But if you're one of the faithful few who already knows Andrew Ewanchyna's sleeper 4x space strategy game, you might as well move along: there's nothing to see here to merit spending another $40.

Which is too bad, given how nicely *Divided Galaxies* dresses up. The cheesy shareware-level alien head artwork has been replaced with cheesy comic book-level alien head artwork. Instead of a handful of miniature ship models, there are now scads of miniature ship models. The new quasi-photo-realistic space backgrounds and planets give the game a dash of grandeur that previously lived only in your imagination. Believe it or not, the music is catchy enough (in an 80s-sci-fi-movie-Casio-soundtrack way) that you might even turn it back on from time to time. None of this is necessary, but hey, thanks for the window dressing. It's a shame about the tragic excuse for a cut scene that opens the game.

The non-cosmetic differences are minor. *Starships Unlimited* runs in pause-able real time, but with bigger maps, new limits on freighter capacity (and therefore income), and slower time compression, games take longer to get underway. You'll almost never want the 1x time rate instead of the 5x time rate, but you'll frequently wish for a faster time rate. The first patch added a cheat code to run





the game at 10x, but this isn't as convenient as toggling between 1x and 5x. The addition of orbital space docks means ships are outfitted without interrupting your planet's production, so your infrastructure won't come to a halt every time a scout ship needs to refill its rocket packs. There are new types of artifacts that give individual ships special bonuses, reinforcing the game's emphasis on tactical spaceship combat. Artifacts that improve specific types of weapons encourage the use of weapon systems you might not otherwise use.

The interface is essentially the same. The menu is replaced by a row of convenient buttons. Although it's now easier to colonize planets—something that rarely happens anyway—*Divided Galaxies* uses the same Byzantine interface for diplomacy and trade. In addition to an updated version of the thorough HTML file, there's a slickly produced PDF manual.

If *Divided Galaxies* had been billed as a sequel (as it was when it was originally announced), it would be a disservice to the game's original fans duped into buying it and expecting substantial new content. But since Matrix Games is making no bones about the fact that this is an updated version of Andrew Ewanchyna's superlative game, there's nothing mercenary here. All that *Divided Galaxies* means is that *Starships Unlimited*, currently the definitive single-player science fiction strategy game, has finally found a publisher.

UPSIDE	4x space strategy at its best: nimble, elegant, and addictive
DOWNSIDE	If you already have the original, the minor improvements aren't worth the price of this re-release
RATING	★★★★½

Gorasul: The Legacy of the Dragon

Raised by dragons, weaned on Baldur's Gate, translated from German

by John Brandon

GENRE Role-playing DEVELOPER Silver Style [www.silverstyle.de] PUBLISHER Jowood Productions [www.jowood.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 350, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

Imagine life as the young hero Roszondas in the role-playing clone *Gorasul: The Legacy of the Dragon*. As an orphan abandoned at birth and raised by fire-snorting dragons, his moniker was both difficult to pronounce and dangerously feminine. "Hey Ronda, kill off any demonic hordes today?" they would chide, deepening the young fellow's resolve to control the otherworldly powers bestowed by his well-meaning parents.

Unfortunately, his success is short-lived. After dying at the hands of those aforementioned demons, he reawakens with barely enough dragon magic to start a campfire. Alone, confused, and hell-bent on defeating his enemies a second time, Roszondas sets off on a journey to rediscover his hidden talents. Whether he succeeds depends greatly on your ability to mash keys, buy an ample supply of healing potions, and steer clear of the bad guys until you're good and ready.

Sound familiar? It should. *Gorasul* plays exactly like *Dungeon & Dragons*-licensed products such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*. Still, as a hack-and-slash adventure, *Gorasul* succeeds mostly by virtue of its imitation, despite some strangely translated dialogue, system-crashing bugs, and some infuriating design decisions.

Everything you love about *Baldur's Gate* is here, with a few added twists. The core game is all about exploration, conversation, quests, and combat. As you collect better stuff, your character encounters increasingly garrulous enemies. Darkened catacombs hide buried treasures (and not so subtle Zombies). Helpful townsfolk request strange, hard-to-find objects, just to keep you busy. Local town merchants tempt you with Elven cloaks, over-priced but wondrously powerful swords, and strange Kobold elixirs.

The game breaks from *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition with mysterious dragon skills that enhance your character's combat abilities. Roszondas can only use these gifts when he is nearing death, but they pack a mighty punch. Your ability to deftly attack your foes with dragon wizardry and then heal up for another assault will often determine the success of battle. Leveling up provides a whole new set of experience points to divide between your standard abilities and the dragon skills, which is very compelling.

Unfortunately, lengthy conversations with the game's denizens are poorly translated from German, and some are poorly written to begin with. Your sidekick sword announces that it will "split your enemies in two real fast." Upon meeting a Kobold warrior, you engage him in combat and emerge victorious. "You just won because big warrior not in shape," he proclaims. "You come back when fat man get spanking." Ouch. Some of these remarks are downright hysterical; mostly they are confusing and frustrating.

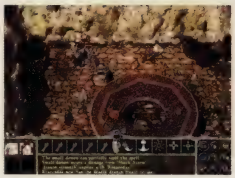
The boxed version of the game has some serious bugs. Saved games cause fatal system crashes, and sometimes the game gobbles up system resources and closes unexpectedly. Most of these problems were solved in a recent patch, although some saved games remain unloadable.

A few design decisions are completely inexplicable. For example, early in the game, you must dispatch a dragon with an orc concoction. You have to kill the orcs to get the brew, but the game fails to provide you with any clues about why you should do so. Without knowing explicitly how to unlock the next part of the game, you might find yourself wandering around aimlessly for quite some time.

The game events unfold in a somewhat rigid fashion, and the combat sequences are overly choreographed. Some sections of the game can only be solved in very specific ways, and the nonlinear room-to-room combat leaves little room for creativity in exploration.

Gorasul features a compelling story that figures prominently in the gameplay, and that goes a long way towards salving some of the game's more frustrating problems. Crisp graphics feature picturesque water fountains, ornate statues, and lush forest hideaways. A lurid soundtrack from the medieval group Corvus Corax adds tremendously to the fantasy atmosphere. While it borrows heavily from the *Baldur's Gate* bag of tricks and has a few rough edges, it's still worth a look.

Roszondas speaks to the war trainer.
You just-wan because I big warrior not in shape. You come back when trainer not have headache, then you fat man get spanking.



[from top] Elf. Pointed ears. Willing to travel to faraway lands and chop demons in half. Pretty good at Euchre. >>> "You fat man get spanking" sounds funnier when you say it out loud to a friend. >>> That's me laying (or is it lying?) on the ground, dead, amidst a demon horde.

UPSIDE	More of the same in the Baldur's Gate vein
DOWNSIDE	Pre-patch crashes, translation snafus, poor design decisions
RATING	★★★☆☆

Being evil in the bathroom.

Evil Twin

All style and no play make Cyprien a dull, irritating boy

by Matthew Peckham

GENRE Action DEVELOPER In Utero [www.in-utero.com] PUBLISHER UbiSoft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 400, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

"We live in an age starved of new images." So says the German film director Werner Herzog. If it is true, let In Utero's surreal nightmarish trip into the mind of one very disturbed, orphaned boy stand as argument against the old adage that "there is nothing new under the sun." It's really too bad that *Evil Twin: Cyprien's Chronicles* was designed as a game instead of a film, because it might have soared as a celluloid cousin to *The City of the Lost Children*. It apparently started out as an animated feature; along the way, someone decided it would be a great idea to turn the story into a video game, which should have been fine given UbiSoft's experience and success with the *Rayman* series. Unfortunately, *Evil Twin* has more in common with the ill-fated *Tonic Trouble* than Ubi Soft's flagship property thanks to spotty control, reckless camera angles, and uninspired, frustrating gameplay.

Cyprien, the dreadlocked hero (and Raggedy Andy look-alike) lives in an orphanage that looks like a Salvador Dali rendition of the Bates motel. You learn that his parents were killed on his birthday, and also that he's a sour, temperamental smart aleck with an imaginary talking teddy bear named Lenny. While Cyprien fumes about his dreary life to Lenny, creepy Lovecraftian tendrils mysteriously snatch his friends in the orphanage. Cyprien is whisked away to the magical world of Undabed where he must rescue his friends, find his teddy bear, and confront the force behind Undabed's enigmas—a being auspiciously dubbed "The Master."

The world of Undabed is a creepy Tim Burton, Lewis Carroll double-dip. Black thunderheads full of stars lumber across bronze cloudscapes; striped and mottled cloth stitches the sides of buildings, walls, and the ground itself; fiery lava pits soak the landscape in coppery hues. It's a bit like *American McGee's Alice* cranked up on acid. The world's inhabitants are equally unsettling—elephants on swings, stubby guards split down the middle, talking arachnids, and so on. You'll bounce your way through this kaleidoscope landscape collecting brown teddy bear faces to gain extra lives (they also show you where to go) and nabbing "Super Cyp" powerups to temporarily transform you into a badass masked superhero with a thing for black leather and elemental force attacks.

As soon as you start moving, however, the visual honeymoon grinds to a halt. For some reason, the developers seem to think the camera works best at an angle just slightly higher than Cyprien's head. This translates to places where you'll actually be unable to see the spot you're aiming for, forcing you to make a guess. The camerawork also often removes all sense of depth perception at critical moments. There's a level inside a tree, for instance, that could have been brilliant. It resembles a level in *Rayman 2* that involved ascending by hitching rides on updrafts. Instead, *Evil Twin's* fatally designed camera angles make navigating the tree's air currents, swirling leaves, and tricky platforms about as fun as trying to balance on the edge of a skyscraper roof with one eye closed.

Voice acting is a mixed bag, with terrific performances by some of the more bizarre personalities, but flat and underwhelming deliveries by Cyprien and his friends. It doesn't help that the writing is uneven, often failing to live up to the story's promises with awkward one-liners and scenes that feel forced. The game also suffers from problematic lighting effects and doesn't include a gamma setting in the video options (you'll have to turn up the brightness setting on your monitor in certain levels just to move around). Next to the visuals, only Bertrand Eluerd's deliciously eerie score (that's totally Elfman-meets-Badalementi) lives up to the premise's potential. The game is almost worth the purchase for the MP3 tracks alone.

A demi. That's not a glitch—they're actually split down the middle.

Too many platform games fail because of bad control and shoddy camera design. You'd think by now it would be rote with developers since *Mario 64* hit the scene six years ago, but the crippled titles show up year after year. *Evil Twin* lives up to its name, particularly when compared to the superior *Rayman 2*. In spite of its pleasing visuals and fantastic dreamscapes, the game is an interesting but failed experiment.

UPSIDE	Sumptuous graphics and mind-bending textures, ultra-creepy and surreal art
DOWNSIDE	Lousy control, unacceptable camera design, obnoxious zero-sum platforming
RATING	★★½☆☆

Battlecruiser Millennium

A freeform universe of varying detail

by Denny Atkin

GENRE Space Simulation, flame war igniter DEVELOPER 3000AD, Inc. [www.bc3000ad.com] PUBLISHER 3000AD, Inc. [www.bc3000ad.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

Reams have been written about the history of the *Battlecruiser* series, some of it fascinating and more than a little pathological. Suffice it to say that *Battlecruiser Millennium* has enjoyed a unique gestation, but that shouldn't stop people from taking a look at this fascinating game. It's a fresh, new take on the space sim genre, offering a dynamic universe akin to the one in the oft-delayed *Freelancer*. And unlike *Battlecruiser 3000AD*, this edition actually works.

Battlecruiser Millennium takes place in a dynamic, reactive universe that features 25 star systems and dozens of planets. You can fight the usual space battles, but you can also drop into a fighter and head into the atmosphere for some air combat. Or ride a shuttle down to the surface and fight tank vs. tank or man-to-man. The scope of the game is impressive—from hyperspace jumps between massive space stations to infiltrating an enemy base on foot.

As you might expect with such an ambitious design, some parts work better than others. The game is at its peak during space combat, where you control your hulking capital ship and direct fighters and other units to attack targets. If you're particularly gutsy, you can man a fighter yourself. The planet-side combat, on the other hand, pales in comparison to games that focus exclusively on that type of combat (*Tribes*, for instance). Your best bet is to watch it from a command standpoint—load up a shuttle with marines and send them down to the planet's surface to wipe out an enemy base, then sit back and watch the action unfold from the command chair.

The dynamic campaign is amazingly well done. While investigating a new system, you may come across a full-blown planetary invasion going on, with space stations under attack and ground bases under orbital bombardment. The universe feels alive… but it also lacks drama. It plays very much like a simulation—take your hardware into battle, protect your own, blow up the bad guys, and perhaps make some money trading on the side. There are no grand mysteries unfolding, no Captain Kirk-like negotiations with alien supercomputers. It's a trade-off that may or may not be worth it, depending on your tastes.

On the upside, the universe is fully dynamic even in the campaign, so you can ignore a mission and go bother an enemy base instead. The mission will play out whether or not you participate. Despite the overall lack of scripting, there are still plenty of surprises. You might be chasing a fighter that seems to be a long way from home only to get a warning from your crewmember that something is out there. Seconds later a capital ship drops its cloak and begins to pound you.

You won't find jaw-dropping special effects here, but the game doesn't look bad. The planetary systems offer variety—black vastness in one, the remnants of a background supernova in another. The particle effects are slick, and the sense of scale is amazing. If you think the orbital station dwarfs your SuperCarrier, exit the craft and walk around on it. It'll take you minutes just to cross the perimeter of the station's ring. The planets look impressive from space, but on the ground the blocky vehicles and roughly animated soldiers are less compelling.

Don't expect to jump into the game and start playing. The learning curve is considerable, particularly when it comes to the interface. It works just fine, but the icon-based controls and pop-up menus take some getting used to. The communication and computer feel very dated and has a stark, basic feel. When you're watching your marines fight off an invasion force on a screen full of text, you have to wonder if the development resources spent on creating planetary combat might have been put to better use creating the interior of the ship and its stations in 3D.

A battlecruiser passes over the ruins of a destroyed space station. >>> The sense of scale is staggering. There are marines standing on the station below, but they're invisible from this distance. >>> Attacking an enemy command & control center in a fighter.

Battlecruiser Millennium actually delivers one of the most interesting gameplay experiences in recent memory. If you enjoy freeform play in a universe where you're just one of many players, it's worth a look. If you prefer a structured story where you're the lead character in a universe that revolves around your actions, where you have clearly defined missions and goals, however, then this is not the game for you.

UPSIDE	An extremely interesting, freeform universe
DOWNSIDE	Planetary combat won't be that interesting until multiplayer is implemented
RATING	★★★½☆

"One of the most innovative and appealing cross-genre approaches yet."
- IGN.com
"As if Renegade weren't unique as it is... Command & Conquer mode definitely sets it apart from the competition."
- GameSpot
"...Renegade may well become the new CounterStrike for many of us."
- Electric Playground Online
VICTORY IS AT HAND
"Action fans, this is one game you should definitely wait for."
- GameSpy.com
"It is a Command & Conquer fan's dream come true."
- PC Game Central
"Renegade is not a game to miss."
- AVault.com
The list goes on. Now it's your turn to experience for yourself the intense first-person action of Command & Conquer™ at ground level. Explore, drive, snipe and blast your way through the gripping singleplayer campaign, then take it online in our exclusive team-based multiplayer 'C&C' mode. You up to the task, soldier?
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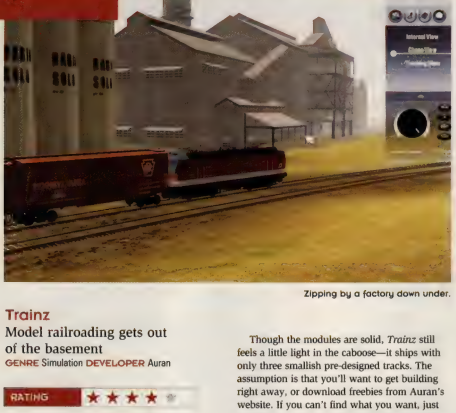


Zipping by a factory down under.

Trainz

Model railroading gets out of the basement

GENRE Simulation DEVELOPER Auran

RATING ★★★★☆

[www.auran.com] PUBLISHER Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

Visit the National Model Railroad Association's web site and you'll unearth an enthusiast paradise. The "beginner" pages alone are thick with treatises on budget carpentry, scenery essentials, and homebrew wiring. Auran's *Trainz* takes aim at this crowd and manages to hit near the mark. Thanks to its powerful design tools and slick user interface, anyone interested in model trains will want to take a close look at this virtual toy.

Trainz contains the first three core modules in what will eventually be a series of add-ons ranging from dispatcher and commuter simulations to online communities of competing business moguls. The "collector" module lets you ogle your cars in glorious 3D and add to the assemblage as you go by importing models you've built or downloaded off the Internet. Layouts are constructed in the "surveyor" module, which (thankfully) has the learning curve of a stick. Drop track, whip up a consist, and you'll be zipping along in minutes thanks to a devilishly smart interface. You can slap just about anything you want onto your layout: terrain deformation, weather effects, industrial buildings, crossings and vehicles, you name it, and there are hundreds of objects to choose from. When you're finished tweaking, hop into the hot seat with the "driver" module and you'll be clicking the DCC (digital command control) gauge like a switch-happy Casey Jones.

Though the modules are solid, *Trainz* still feels a little light in the caboose—it ships with only three smallish pre-designed tracks. The assumption is that you'll want to get building right away, or download freebies from Auran's website. If you can't find what you want, just build it yourself, or visit Auran's "download station" to see if someone else has beat you to it.

If painting lumberyards and frosting miniature evergreens on elaborate plywood foundations gets you hot and bothered, *Trainz* is for you. Nothing else on the market offers the chance to recapture the glory of model railroading on the cheap and, more importantly, without the basement-sized mess. —*Matthew Peckham*

Campaign Corinth

General Tiller returns to the battlefields we love best

RATING ★★★★☆

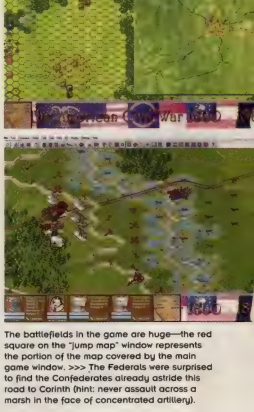
GENRE War DEVELOPER John Tiller [fly.hiwaay.net/~tiller] PUBLISHER HPS [www.hpssims.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2 Players; Internet, LAN, Play-By-Email, Modem, Serial ESRB Not rated

It's been several years, but designer John Tiller has final revisited the American Civil War with *Campaign Corinth*, the first in a planned series of games from HPS. Covering a western theater Confederate offensive of 1862, the game goes into territory never covered in detail by any other computer wargame.

Unlike earlier Tiller American Civil War games, *Corinth* doesn't cover one big battle; it covers a series of battles across time, a complete campaign. The battlefields are large, but the forces involved are smaller than those you'd see in the "big name" battles of the East, so the fights in the game tend to be more fluid and mobile. Even the big-map, big-turn battles move at a brisk pace. Perhaps the only downside to the often-freewheeling nature of the fights is that the AI can't quite deal with it, and complete blowouts are common. You can follow different paths through the game, the battles in the campaign are linked, and the results of one battle carry over, all resulting in a game play experience with much greater legs than Tiller's earlier American Civil War games.

The game is "traditional" in both good and bad ways. It's hex-based and turn-based, although Tiller has implemented a new turn resolution system that greatly speeds play. If you've played a Tiller game before, you can drop right in with little difficulty, as his style carries through all his games. While there are some subtle differences and options in the game play model, it's still much the same as *Battleground: Gettysburg*. This is good if you're comfortable with it, but it would've been nice to seem some innovation in the command and control rules. Also, while the 2D map graphics are great, the 3D views still don't match the quality of the older games from TalonSoft.

But the game play still draws you in like ever before—"just one more turn" syndrome definitely hits you early on. The end result is another solid winner from John Tiller and HPS. —*Scott Udell*



The battlefields in the game are huge—the red square on the "jump map" window represents the portion of the map covered by the main game window. >>> The Federals were surprised to find the Confederates already astride this road to Corinth (hint: never assault across a marsh in the face of concentrated artillery).

[clockwise from top] A multifaceted gun is a soldier's best friend in the fight against alien scum. >>> An alien sniper goes down thanks to the ever-trusty sniper ammo. >>> The AI is good at using terrain and obstacles to its advantage, so be wary when entering the woods.

Codename: Outbreak

Twenty dollars' worth of rampaging aliens

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Action DEVELOPER GSC Game World [www.gsc-game.com] PUBLISHER Titus Games [www.titusgames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

The appeal of budget games is inextricably connected to the ideology of lowered expectations. Most gamers simply don't expect as much bang for their buck if they pay ten or twenty dollars for a game instead of fifty (though they're a lot more likely to notice overpaying for a game in the fifty dollar range). *Codename: Outbreak*, therefore, cuts itself a little slack by virtue of the fact that it's part of Virgin Interactive's new budget line.

This kind-of-tactical first (and third) person shooter mixes alien infestation with squad-based military action in an entertaining, if not particularly innovative or refined, way. For twenty bucks, it's not too bad. The 3D engine is decidedly behind the times, but some of the gameplay is surprisingly advanced. Your squad mates increase their vital stats as they successfully complete missions, and their AI isn't terrible. There's a nice mix of pure shooting action with more strategic elements, such as searching bodies, defending civilians, choosing the time of day to take on a mission, and stealthily crossing enemy ground.

The nineteen missions are tough, intelligent, and engaging, and for the low price, there's plenty of alien-bashing action to go around. The environments are earthbound and usually military in nature, as your squad struggles to mow through ex-human solders and locals who have been taken over by vile invaders from another planet. Multiplayer options are included as well. Good luck finding someone to play with.

Visually, the game is unimpressive. The textures get the job done, but everything in the game has a flat, boxy look. There's plenty of ear candy, including regular audio updates from your intelligence network, but nothing in the overall presentation feels particularly inspired.

If you are looking for a fun and tough action game with some semblance of intelligence, *Codename: Outbreak* is a decent candidate. If nothing else, you get your twenty bucks worth. —*Jason D'Aprile*

Druuna: Morbus Gravis

A slap in the face for Serpieri fans

RATING ★½☆☆☆

GENRE Adventure DEVELOPER Artematica [www.artematica.com] PUBLISHER Microids [www.microids.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, 16 MB 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Mature

Anyone who read *Heavy Metal* magazine in the 1980s should be familiar with Druuna. The orgiastic brunette with the impossible body stumbled her way through a number of Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri's episodic graphic novels beginning in 1985, moving from one surreal setting to another. These odd tales didn't make much sense, but they did give the artist lots of excuses to draw her naked. *Druuna: Morbus Gravis* is less a tribute to the graphic novels and more a cheap copy of *Resident Evil*, complete with PlayStation-quality graphics, a clunky interface, and impenetrable puzzles. The biggest problem is that it's a cop-out. Serpieri's brand of blatant sensuality is absent, his wildly explicit sex scenes having been replaced by momentary clips showing the lead character topless. Perhaps that's a little risqué for the computer game world, but it's still a pale shadow of the source material. Sex is the engine powering all of Serpieri's work, and its total absence makes this a *Druuna* product in license only.

The graphics are at least three years behind the times, and the gameplay borders on abysmal. The plot is dense and silly. Druuna is in trouble, and you need to sit down at a machine called the Brainholder, enter her mind, and save her... somehow. Mostly you wander around grimy corridors and pick up random objects that sometimes prove useful after a lot of random experimentation. Puzzle solutions seem to come out of thin air, when they come at all.

Control is poor, at best. Druuna can't change direction without coming to a complete halt and rotating one step at a time, complete with a clicking sound effect that brings to mind the "Spock's Brain" episode of *Star Trek*. The fixed camera angles usually keep Druuna at such a distance that it's easy to lose track of her. Unless you choose the full installation option, which is a hefty three gigabytes, the action comes to a crashing halt for lengthy periods while loading data from the CD.

Druuna: Morbus Gravis is only for serious fans of Serpieri who just have to see their heroine brought to life. Given the popular belief that computer and video games are for kids, it's difficult to see how Druuna could be successfully brought to the format at all. If such a adaptation is possible, Artematica didn't accomplish it here. —*Brett Todd*

The Druuna in the game versus the Druuna on the box... It's a classic bait and switch.

OUT of the BOX

getting it

Are game publishers finally doing more for consumers?

Over the past year, things have changed regarding the way that developers and publishers look at the mod scene. Whether it's because of the pressure applied by two console system launches or a simple desire to give the consumer more, companies aren't taking gamers for granted any more.

Even the most angry and jaded gamers (the ones who preordered *World War II Online* and didn't use the default directory to install *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor*, to use two examples) have to admit that there was a subtle yet noticeable shift towards the shiny, happy side of the spectrum during 2001. Development houses began releasing official add-ons free of charge. A lot of companies continued to support their games long after they shipped.

Troika Games put out a mod pack with six new quests for Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura

Interplay's Black Isle Studios responded to complaints that its *Heart of Winter* expansion for *Icewind Dale* was too short by issuing the *Trials of the Luremaster* module. This added a complete adventure that doubled the gameplay of the original. Microsoft's *Zoo Tycoon* received a boost courtesy of new animals, buildings, and special scenarios posted on the game's official website. Lionhead Studios prepped gamers for *Black & White*'s *Creature Isle* retail expansion pack with two feature add-ons, three new maps, and even a way to listen in on your villagers' conversations. Codemasters bolstered *Operation Flashpoint* with the downloadable *Red Hammer* expansion. Unlike the others, it wasn't entirely free, but at a mere $6.99, it's close. Troika Games put out a mod pack with six new quests for *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (see the opposite page for more). Monolith Productions sold single-player and multiplayer level packs for *Aliens vs. Predator 2*, and then released developer's tools and tutorials to make third-party map design a lot easier (again, see the opposite page for more information). Even patches were beefier than usual. Very few fixes were released without significant gameplay improvements or accessories, from Flying Lab Software's extensive AI upgrade for *Rails Across America* through Croteam's support for ATI's TruForm graphics card feature in *Serious Sam*.

One thing that you'll notice is that some of the best-supported games were also some of the year's biggest games. Is it possible that the companies that supported their products were rewarded with better sales and good word of mouth (something that can turn a hit with the critics into a hit with the public)? Knowing that the developer and publisher are standing behind a game can make all the difference in the world to the average Joe with a limited entertainment budget. Free add-ons, along with the tools and instructions that will convince the online modding community to keep the ball rolling, can be a deciding factor when it's time for Joe to buy a new game. It's gratifying to see that some gaming companies are finally getting it.

Others, however, remain clueless. Electronic Arts chose not to release the editing tools for *Clive Barker's Undying*... and then killed the promising series because of poor sales. On the heels of *Star Trek Voyager Elite Force*, Activision dumped on consumers a $20 expansion pack that added the real voice of Seven of Nine and about three hours of gameplay. Although these problems mean that there is still some way to go before the computer game industry fully understands how many benefits can be realized by embracing the online community. More free add-ons are needed, as are developer's toolkits and the encouragement to get things moving. Hopefully we'll see more of that as we move further into 2002. ●

Mods & Ends

Sidling Up to Sidrial

Machinima meets modification for the first time in *Sidrial*. The total conversion for *Quake III* from Fountainhead Entertainment (games for objectivists!) blends the "game, meet movie" philosophy behind machinima with a plain old game. The 118 MB download features a movie about bloodthirsty aliens and a couple of game levels where you get to blow up bloodthirsty aliens. The complete package is probably a little less than the sum of its parts—and certainly less groundbreaking than the "innovative leap in the entertainment industry" claptrap spouted in the Fountainhead press release—but still a worthwhile download for *Quake III* fans looking for something fresh.

More Quests for Arcanum

The developers at Troika Games haven't stopped working on *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*. Fans of the innovative "swords and steam engines" role-playing game can now download a free mod pack that adds a lot to the hundred-hour original. The 37.3 MB file features six new adventure modules for your party. Highlights include "Hellgate," where you must free a town from besieging demons, "Buried Secrets," which involves the search for an ancient book, and "Woodmir Race," a competition for 50,000 gold pieces reminiscent of *Cannonball Run* (save for the absence of Dom Deluise). If this doesn't sate your desire for *Arcanum* files and info, check out the unofficial Terra Arcanum website.

No One Can Hear You Import

Monolith continues the trend of official add-ons with a mod tools pack for *Aliens versus Predator 2*. All of the programs used to create levels for the full game are included in the 8.73 MB download. Prominently featured are the world-building DEdit and model-designing ModelEdit utilities, along with exporters for popular third-party applications such as Maya and 3D Studio Max. Extensive help files and samples have been provided by the design gurus at Monolith, as well as walkthroughs that, um, walk you through the process of configuring objects for all of the multiplayer modes. The *Aliens versus Predator 2* mod tools can be downloaded from FilePlanet.

Star Wars Empires IV

Star Wars geeks that know their stuff will recognize the Kuat Drive Yards as home to the Imperial Star Destroyer and the TIE Fighter. Without the Kuat family, you'd be making a completely different annoying sound to your girlfriend while forcing her to watch the battle of Yavin IV for the thousandth time. Now, thanks to the Kuat Drive Yards mods, you can take your "galaxy far, far away" fetish to for Malfador Machinations' space strategy game, *Space Empires IV*. Andres Lescano and friends have developed a series of ship-sets representing each of the races in George Lucas' corner of the universe. All of the different factions are included, even uncommon ones such as the Black Sun criminal organization from the *Shadows of the Empire* one-off and the Yuuzhan Vong invaders from the current series of novels. All of the files can be found at the official Kuat Drive Yards home page.

Lost and Found

What was lost is now found. The missing Free Agent Utility for *High Heat Major League Baseball 2002*, originally mentioned a few months ago (to the dismay of readers who got 404 Not Found errors when typing in the provided URL), is back online at a new home page. Check the Linkage section on the opposite page for the program's current location. And hope that it's still current by the time that you're able to read this. ●

Movie meets game in Sidrial for Quake III Arena. >>> Don't forget to include plenty of alien fodder in your Aliens versus Predator 2 levels.

LINKAGE

ALIENS VS. PREDATOR MOD TOOLS
www.fileplanet.com/index.asp?file=83084

ALIENS VS. PREDATOR 2 OFFICIAL PAGE
avp2.sierra.com

ARCANUM MOD PACK
www.fileplanet.com/index.asp?section=19926file=83276

ARCANUM OFFICIAL PAGE
arcanum.sierra.com

FILEPLANET
www.fileplanet.com

FOUNTAINHEAD ENTERTAINMENT
www.fountainheadent.com

HIGH HEAT FREE AGENT
www.austinm56.50megs.com

KUAT DRIVE YARDS
se4kdy.cyberwars.com

TERRA ARCANUM
www.terra-arcanum.com

BARGAIN BIN

Crusaders of Might and Magic

Fans of the Heroes of Might & Magic series might finally be interested in this Tomb Raider-style knockoff now that it's under $8. [3DO/1999]

Serious Sam: The First Encounter

The arrival of Serious Sam: The Second Encounter has pushed the price of the original down to just $6.99. Mindless shooters don't get any better—or come any cheaper—than this. [GodGames/2001]

Summoner

Perhaps the best "Wait'll it hits the bargain bin," role-playing game of the past year has finally been marked down. Summoner can now be found for less than $10. [THQ/2001]

Thief Series

Thief: The Dark Project and Thief II: The Metal Age are now available for less than $15 each. Meaning that you no longer have any excuses not to add these landmark titles to your PC games collection. [Eidos, 1998, 2000]

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Source Code 11392

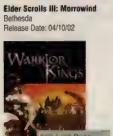
Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
Bethesda
Release Date: 04/10/02

Serious Sam: Second Encounter
G.O.D.
Now

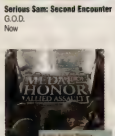
IL-2 Sturmovik
Ubi Soft
Now

Return to Castle Wolfenstein
Activision
Now

Destroyer Command
Ubi Soft
Now



Warrior Kings
Microids
Now



Medal of Honor
EA
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Civilization III
Infogrames
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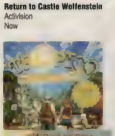

Tropico Exp. Pk.: Paradise Isle
G.O.D.
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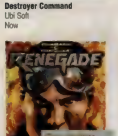

Command & Conquer Renegade
EA
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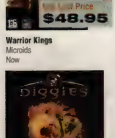

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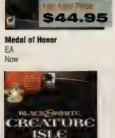

Black & White Creature Isle
EA
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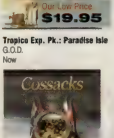
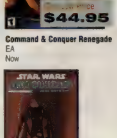
Age of Wonders II
G.O.D.
Release Date: 04/27/02



Cossacks European Wars: Age of Wars Expansion Pack
CDV
Now



Star Wars Jedi Outcast Jedi Knight II
Lucas Arts
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Grand Theft Auto 3 PS2
Rock Star
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Matt Hoffman's Pro BMX 2 PS2
Activision
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Eternal Darkness Game Cube
Nintendo
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Acclaim
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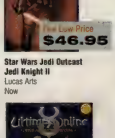

Ultima Online: Lord Blackthorn's Revenge
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What's occupying the gamer mind nowadays? How about console wars and Elf Porn? It seems people liked our February cover story. "Awesome… had to pass it along to a couple of buddies, they thought it was a great read too," says Stradivari, who also wants the cover image as a wallpaper on the CD. Well… look on the April CD (it's also available on our website at www.cgonline.com). A few were, shall we say, taken aback by the coverline "The New Masters of Magic." Stephen Daly calls us "rat bastards" for using that line, as he's been waiting years for a sequel (he's joking, we think). John Cable, who dual boots specifically to run old DOS, was slightly more pragmatic. "Too bad, but there are other great games to purchase." The cover image, and past ones we've used, did have a lightly odd effect on at least one reader, as you can see…

Elf porn

What's the deal with all the women on the cover of your magazine? I've looked at the newsstand this past year, and all the covers are women! If my mom sees this she'll think I subscribed to fantasy elf porn or something.

Fourn Dog, MD, PhD
President, Elf Porn Anonymous

Unless we're horribly mistaken, the knight from *Stronghold* isn't a woman, though who really knows what's under that armor…—ed

Feel the love

I awoke to a bagged copy of the February issue of *CGM*. It is officially the New Year and I'm reminded to renew my subscription as evidenced by the "This is your last issue" notice. Of which I fully intend to comply.

I've thoroughly enjoyed reading the magazine through the years and have come to appreciate the many personalities who come together to create each month's issue. The biggest plus is that I get a down to earth magazine with editorials I can read without cringing. Other magazines feel the need for over-the-top delivery and splashy color pages to present information, and for that reason I've all but cancelled many of my gaming related subscriptions.

CGM continues to be a magazine I look forward to receiving each month. Best of luck for the New Year!

Karman Eng

A game designer speaks

I usually don't write letters to magazines, but I felt that I had to respond to the article "So You Want to Be a Game Designer? Part II" in your January issue [*CGM 134*].

The article says that a "game designer" doesn't exist. Well, I better check in the mirror then. I've been a game designer for seven years now, and when I started I was still in college and wet behind the ears. I wasn't an "industry legend" or starting my own company.

Yes, there are some companies who don't hire game designers. There are also quite a few who do. Interplay had 10 or so game designers working in various parts of the company at one point. There were three main game designers, myself included, working on *Fallout*. The jobs are out there. A friend of mine, a junior designer, got laid off from a company and found work within two weeks at a small development house.

Now, this isn't to say that I wasn't damn lucky. I happened to know someone who needed a game designer to take over a small project. I had no experience, but I was a good writer, so I got the job. It is incredibly hard to become a game designer without knowing anyone, but it isn't impossible. Quite a few QA workers have become successful game designers for companies.

Game Design is not something substantial. You can't make a portfolio, or show them your code. But there is still an instinct, and there is still structure. Yes, the entire team has input in the design, but I've seen many, many games die a horrible death because they were "designed by committee." You still need a person to keep the vision on track, someone to organize the design, to write the various parts, and to come up with specific puzzles and such. To say that we don't exist is an opinion, not a reality.

That's not to say that a programmer or an artist doesn't know design. I'm currently a senior designer over here at Interplay Entertainment, but I also consider myself both a junior artist and a junior programmer. A good designer knows all of these aspects, and can help put them into a cohesive game.

I think you're cheating your readers by telling them that game designers don't exist. Yes, the lead designer of the project is sometimes the project lead, but not always. Yes, there are companies who "poo-poo" game designers, but in my opinion those companies are missing out on a valuable resource.

Game Design seems to be one of those fields that everyone feels they can do, but only a few know how to do it right.

Brian Freyermuth
Interplay Productions

Holy chick

Hey I would like to say to Tom Chick one thing, amen brother. I almost totally agree with him on his statements about consoles ["Console Envy," *CGM 135*]. I own a GameCube and yes it does look like a box of Kleenex and weighs about as much. I also agree on his point that graphics don't matter (that much). I believe you are really shallow if you buy a game purely because of its eye candy. I mean how dare you call yourself a gamer if that is why you buy a game.

My number one interest is the plot. I know to many people that is a statement they really need to hear. Games keep on coming out prettier and prettier but many times, as I have noticed, the plot gets shallower and shallower until all you have is a pretty game where you do the same thing over and over and over (e.g. *EverQuest*). I say give me a plot line then give me graphics! Graphics are necessary in a game only to give you a feel for your environment and your character. Computer games require imagination on both the programmer and the gamer side.

Bob Villa

Animosity

I would like to posit a question: why does there seem to be such animosity between those who partake of console games, and computer gamers? While I admire the dignity you (usually) bring to the genre of computer games, it seems a bit juvenile to be constantly going back and forth about why one method of gaming is better than the other, though, to be completely fair, you have given a nod in the direction of the Xbox. I am forced to wonder, however, if that is simply because it is being produced by the axis of the modern computer software world (face it, folks, it's the truth), Microsoft.

I myself heartily enjoy selections from both worlds, and I personally think that each has something to offer those of us out there who enjoy passing the time with video games. I have recently finished both *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and *Max Payne* for the PC, and have thoroughly enjoyed myself, though I am typically more a fan of computer strategy games (*StarCraft*, *WarCraft II*, and the *Civilization* series are my personal favorites). On the other hand, console games do have much to offer, and some, at least, are not as juvenile as some in the milieu of computer games would believe. The *Final Fantasy* series, though often light-hearted and, for lack of a better word, fanciful, consistently produces some of the most well-thought story lines and character interaction to rival even some of the best films we have available. Similarly, the *Metal Gear Solid* series has produced probably the two tightest, most well-scripted and well-planned video games you can find. Suffice it to say that I felt that the production values on this particular series rivaled some of the best movies Hollywood has made. [*And to some, rivaled their level of interactivity… —ed*]

> "...generalizing the entire console medium as juvenile does the industry, those of us who enjoy console games, and indeed yourselves, a disservice. . "

Now, I am not trying to sell anyone on moving over to console games. It is certainly not everyone's cup of tea, and I will be the first to admit that many console games are indeed quite juvenile. Please realize, though, that generalizing the entire console medium as juvenile does the industry, those of us who enjoy console games, and indeed yourselves, a disservice. It damages the industry, insults those of us who do consider ourselves to be mature gamers, and may cause you to miss out on a game you might just enjoy. So, perhaps those out there in the computer game world might want to stop and think for a moment: can't we all just get along?

C. Schuettpelz

Eternal battles

Every month I always seem to find a comment in the magazine about the PC versus consoles. Whether it's fragging my buddies on a PC or playing Snake in *Metal Gear Solid 2* on a console, it's all about fun and games. The PC has its ups and downs, just as a console does, but both bring games that entertain us.

I would ask for all PC and Console gamers alike to think of what I said and ask the question, "Can't we all just get along?"

Justin Edgell

Where would the fun be in that? D00d, Gamecube r0ölz! Xbox suxx0rz! PS2 or die! Linux r0xx0rz! Macs suxx0rz! Amiga r00lz! C64 kickz Atari 800 azz! Anyway, as the PC heads toward its inevitable death (maybe, maybe not), expect it to get more shrill and obnoxious as people defend their platform of choice, just as it was/is for fans of Macs, Amigas, Commodores, Ataris, etc. —ed

Dig that hardware

I have been a subscriber to your magazine for years now, and 90% of the reason I keep re-subscribing, is due to Jason Cross' superb reviews and unique points of views. I find myself jumping to the middle of the magazine to read what he's covering this month. I'm not sure whether he chooses his topics or if it is suggested by the editors/publisher, but the topics are always interesting, well done and very up to date.

I also read other magazines but don't find their writers to be half the hardware expert as Jason is. They tend to ramble on with a bunch of new gadgets instead of getting into the guts and grit of hardware/software. So don't lose this fella, or you may lose a subscriber...

Shawn

Wait a second, so Jason Cross is only worth one subscriber? Sheesh, get rid of him, he's too damn expensive. –CGM Beancounter

We've fired the beancounter. —ed

What about the Mac?

I read the article in *CGM 133* between the Intel Pentium 4 processor (2GHz) and AMD's Athlon XP(1.53GHz). I do agree in most places that the Athlon XP is better than the Pentium 4, and if I had a choice between the two, I would go with the AMD, but I think a better "showdown" between processors would be the Pentium 4 versus the Macintosh G4 processor.

Ryan Sonnenberg

Maybe, though it's usually pretty hard to compare processors on different platforms. Still, we'd be interested in doing such a piece, but see the response to the next letter.—ed

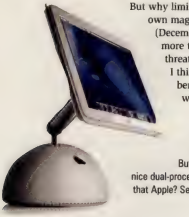
Be nice to Mac users

Last issue in a response to a letter you joked that you were supposed to hate Mac users! Don't hate Macintosh users. Based on extensive reading of the reviews in your magazine it seems that the companies that are nice to Macintosh users by making games for them make the best games. Has Blizzard had a bad game yet? Bungie was big on the Macintosh platform too, and they got millions and millions

from Microsoft! [*And don't forget id Software and Epic and others that are cross-platform.*—ed]

But why limit ourselves to game companies? Your very own magazine once proudly featured Mac on its cover (December of 1997), and your paid circulation has more than doubled since that time. Given the threats you face from information over the Internet, I think you should take great pride in those numbers. Clearly increasing numbers of people are willing to pay for the content you offer.

Scott Gallagher



We have no problems with Macs, we were just pandering to the lowest common denominator. Shhh.

But seriously, we wish Apple would actually send us a nice dual-processor G4 or an iLamp, er, iMac to review. You hear that Apple? Send us a machine! —ed

Demo page

Why don't you include a page at least to explain what is on the demo CD?

S.B.

A small percentage of readers get the magazine with the CD, and information is included on the CD when you select the demo. Anything beyond the brief mention in the table of contents seems like a waste of space (and yes, we realize that people will send in tons of examples of other "wastes of space").

SNES or NES

In the Spotlight on page 20 featuring Zombie Smashers X by Totally Screwed Software you stated, "In reality, it's like the old SNES game *River City Ransom...*" *River City Ransom* was made for the NES.

Daniel Cobb

1337 xp141n3d

First of all, can someone please explain to me what the hell leet means, as in "Y0Ur3 50 l337, 1 PH33R Y0UR (H1(K3N5!"

Second, your magazine is awesome, it's the most amazing thing since sliced bread. I think that your magazine rocks, and anyone who dislikes your magazine should be put in a boiling pool of oil and pig entrails, and then covered in acid.

Third, I'd really like it if you put my magazine in your letter. I mean, if you put my letter in your magazine.

BobTheGreaterest

We like the acid bit, but 1337-speak is the way haxx0rz sp34k. Er, got that? It's the kewl d00d way to speak, er, or sp34k, or something like that.

Actually, we have no idea, we just use it because the kids seem to dig it. —ed

My eyes!

I HAVE NOTICED THAT YOUR MAG. GOES GOOD WITH MAC & CHEESE! THE ONLY PROBLEM IS THAT THE INK DOESN'T TASTE TO GOOD! ESP. THE BLUE!!!! i DON;T READ THE ARTICALS ANYMORE THAY MAK ME SLEPPY AN I cANNT THENK! ...I STARTED TO READ ONE AS I WAS CHEWING IT .... i THINK THE THING i nEED iS a NeW cOmPuTeR SO i CAN pLAY aLL tHESE wONdERfUL gAMES YOU tALK AbOuT i tHINK! <i DonNt rEad It i Eat It> sO iF YOU WANT ME TO sTOPP eATING AND READ IT sEND ME oNE laptop AND onE dESTOP wITH lOtS OF THOSE YUMMY COMPUTER GAME BOXES WITH FIRESTARTERS (BOOKS) AND SHINNY FRIZBEES(CDS WITH GAMES ON THEM) AND tHROw IN gENTly (THY BRAKE) A fEw {1 + 1 + 1}D cARDS FOR mY fRIENDS sO tHEY cAN sTOP eATING mine cENTS tHEY aTE tHERE OWN! i'LL eXPEXT DEVIERY IT BI jAN 10!

pS: pUT THIS In yOUR mAG, sO i cAN eAT iT AS i tRY TO reAD iT

NICHOLAS HESTER

Pure poetry

afta i cracked open a bran new ish of yo mag, i busted out all over the dead policeman!!!????....!!! that was mad wickety wack, yo. den i filled typin o da ded so full i blew some mad lead right on thru to da otha side, homey.i hope you you dig my draft, home clice, of youll be down sirrel on the flipflop, time-pants. yo better print this in yo mag mad soon or yul be bangin up high the handle, homeybeef!!!??.

gam ruoy ni siht tnirp
gam ruoy ni siht tnirp
gam ruoy ni siht tnirp
alwaes takin et up 2 da xtreeme,

TheTeacher and AphexMan

To the extreme, ed rocks the mic like a vandal, lights up a stage and waxes a chump like a candle.—ed

Errata

We got a number of ESRB ratings wrong in the February issue. *Deadly Dozen* is rated T, *Rogue Spear Black Thorn* is M, and *MechWarrior 4: Black Knight* is T. We regret the errors. ●

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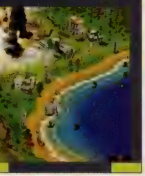

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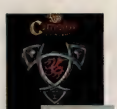

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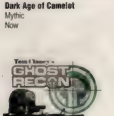

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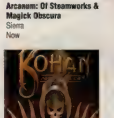

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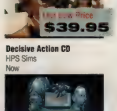

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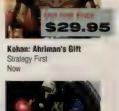

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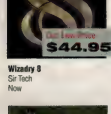

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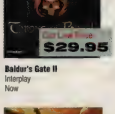

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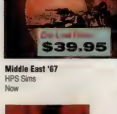

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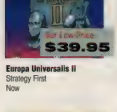

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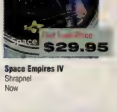

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road to nowhere

the saturation game

As role-playing audiences thin out, should they up the ante?

A while ago, I put out a feeler to see whether or not any of our pool of writers might be interested in collaborating on a feature story involving an experiment in the multiple massively multiplayer online role-playing games. (Ewwww, prefacing that phrase with "multiple" makes it even more unwieldy than usual.) I figured that since probably only a handful of them had played, or were actually still playing, one of these time-suckers, that the response would be somewhat meager. The response was overwhelming. Nearly everyone wanted to participate. Now I know that a handful of them would bite at any assignment in the universe ("Do a study on the proportion of gamers who scratch their butts during RPGs vs. the ones who do it during shooters."), but the others—the ones who are not necessarily full-time journalists—I expected would say, "Ack, not worth the time."

The reason I bring this up is in response to something *EverQuest* co-creator Brad McQuaid said when I was speaking with him about his departure from Sony and the forming of his new company. McQuaid thinks that the MMORPG market is not saturated, a view many would disagree with. While he offered no specifics, he believes that his concept of the "third generation" of this genre will allow for more variety to choose from, and also the possibility of attracting the "ever-elusive casual gamer." Is it possible, then, that the deluge of our writers who profess to be MMORPG-ready represents a larger audience for these time-sinks? An audience that just hasn't found the right one yet?

> "So boys and girls, hit "sign up," haunt your mailbox, and intercept those MasterCard bills. Mom and Dad'll never know."

I think perhaps that Sony (its *EverQuest* being the most heavily subscribed of the current availabilities) is being cautious about whether or not saturation does exist. If the increase in the number of available games causes a subsequent "thinning out" of the population of each, Sony's profit margin dips. But wait! They already have that solved.

Enter *EverQuest Legends*. I'm sure that any of you who follow the online scene have heard of this by now, and I wonder if, when you got the picture, you experienced the same jaw-dropping moment that I did. In visiting its homepage, you'll see a guided tour of *EverQuest Legends*, your Titanium Card to the land of Norrath. This premium service offers the first 8,000 subscribers who sign up a ticket to *EverQuest* paradise. These lucky people will get personal character pages—homepages showing each character's stats, items, and accomplishments, and a personal journal; a dynamic server, about which they say "our dedicated team of Customer Service & Development staff will not only be providing in-game support to our Legends players, but also running new quests and adventures for players of all levels to participate in;" truly unique and legendary items with a possibility of personalization; a calendar of events telling you the who, what, when, and where of server events; an interactive map on which you can locate your own characters, your friend's characters, which zones you have or have not visited; the ability to submit your incredible tales of adventure for server-wide publication (unless they really suck); and Guild Halls, including a guild calendar, message board, member roster, and pages to post guild news, the guild history, and more. Phew.

It seems as though Sony is offering premium subscribers features that perhaps McQuaid and others always had in mind for lowlife-peon-scum subscribers. So, "are you prepared to take on exciting new challenges, discover unknown treasures, become a hero of Legendary proportions?" You can, for a mere $39.95 a month, move (only) eight of your characters to the *Legends* server with no discounts for multiple accounts. No muss, no fuss. Charges will be made directly to your credit card on file. So boys and girls, hit "sign up," haunt your mailbox, and intercept those MasterCard bills. Mom and Dad'll never know. Let's see, nearly $500 per year per person, times 8,000... hmmm.

The weird thing is that people will sign up for this. And if the first experiment works, Sony has little to worry about in terms of profitability. So what about that new "third generation" game? Will it include all of this and more for between $9.95 and $12.95 a month? That probably depends on how *Legends* does. Maybe now we're all screwed. ●

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PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

making the cutscene

Spending a lot of money on very little

For the last year, several PopTop artists have been working on and off creating cut-scenes for *Age of Wonders II*. An outside developer, Triumph Studios, is developing the core game. Triumph is a small studio, getting by on a relatively modest development budget, and PopTop is sucking down a significant portion of that budget (about 15%), for three minutes of video footage that most gamers will skip after one brief viewing. Out of perhaps 50 hours of gameplay by the average gamer, those cut scenes will amount to 0.1% of gameplay time. Spending that much money on so little of the game seems a bit extravagant.

Or is it? Actually, the cut-scene money is well spent, especially for a game like *Age of Wonders II*. The cutscenes play a critical role in establishing story and mood, and selling the game. To do this, the game needs to show the main characters, their enemies, and their environments in realistic poses and camera angles. Unless I missed it, the *Lord of the Rings* movie didn't feature any camera angles showing Middle Earth sprawled out on an isometric map, with black fog covering the "unexplored areas." While *Age of Wonders II* players will soon enough be immersed in such an isometric world, when the main game starts, the player should feel as if they're taking part in an epic story, and a well-made cutscene is the best way to convey that. When I play *Diablo*, in my mind's eye the villain is not the pixellated blob I spend 45 minutes trying to defeat in the game engine; instead, he's a cinematic creature I catch a few glimpses of in elaborate but short cutscenes.

Still, on the basis of story and mood alone, it would be hard to justify spending 15% of the development budget on cutscenes. But creating a great game is only half of what we're trying to accomplish. We also have to sell the game to you, the users, but also to easily impressionable… err… handsome and intelligent store buyers and magazine writers and editors.

> "Buyers and press spend at most 15 minutes per game, but generally won't even linger at a booth if a game doesn't catch their eye within the first three minutes."

The first folks to see a budding game in development are the press and buyers who crowd into the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo each year. They've got three days to see over 1000 total games on display, of which at least 200 could be classified as reasonably "major" games (or so their developers think…). Buyers and press spend *at most* 15 minutes per game, but generally won't even linger at a booth if a game doesn't catch their eye within the first three minutes. In those few minutes, the "AAA" blockbusters are separated from the "B" level also-rans. And in those few minutes, it's pretty hard to sell the viewers on a game's deeply balanced gameplay, AI, or advanced physics engine.

A flashy cut-scene shouldn't matter that much, but it does. In 1998, when PopTop was just a small four-man company showing *Railroad Tycoon II* for the first time, we were on the show floor about 50 feet from Blizzard's *Diablo II* display. Blizzard had set up jumbo screens flanked by huge speakers, blasting out the opening cinematic to the game (no gameplay was shown). Judging from its quality, Blizzard probably spent several times as much on that cut-scene alone as PopTop spent on the entire development of *Railroad Tycoon II*. That game's opening cinematic was a montage of old railroad movie clips that all had one thing in common: they were available for free, or nominal cost, from the National Archives. *Diablo II* sold about 10 times as many copies as *Railroad Tycoon II* in its first month, and although it grew into a nice sleeper hit, selling well over the years, the lower level of initial buzz hurt.

Finally, a nice cut-scene influences opinions of end-consumers far more than most "Graphics Don't Matter" die-hards would admit. While consumers don't face a three-day 1000 game blitz like E3, most consumers do ultimately see a lot more games than they actually play in-depth. Whether it's preview videos from the Internet or game magazine CD-ROMs, in-store demos, or catching a few minutes of the game at a friend's house, there are a lot of short sampling opportunities for games. Even the typical printed previews tend to show a disproportionate number of cut-scene shots. Only those games that pass the quick test get a chance to pry a couple of twenty-dollar bills out of a consumer's wallet at Best Buy. And it takes a lot of twenty-dollar bills to pay for the rest of the game's development. ◆

SPOTLIGHT REVIEW:

USER RATING

Speed	★★★★★
Connectivity	★★★★★
Ease of Use	★★★★★
Reliability	★★★★★
Support	★★★★★

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TOM CHICK

THREE finger salute

pow pow pow pow ching

The myth of the infallible gun

In HBO's *Band of Brothers*, a World War II drama so meticulously researched that Captain Dale Dye is credited as an actor and a military advisor, you can hear a *ching* sound during the battle scenes, as if someone were firing a cash register. I thought it might be the sound of pins pulled from grenades, but then I played *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and learned that grenades sound just like they've been sounding in *Quake* for the past five years.

It wasn't until *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* that I realized what that *ching* was. The Allies default rifle is the M1 Garand. It has a rapid rate of fire and good accuracy, even at moderate distances. The clip holds eight rounds. But unlike the other weapons, you cannot reload until your clip is empty, at which point it automatically pops out with a *ching* that all but says, "Nice job on eight rounds well fired!" It's as gratifying as the *ding* of the carriage return on an old typewriter. This makes the M1 Garand the first person shooter weapon with the most personality, second only to the snark that tries to bite Gordon Freeman's finger in *Half-Life*.

"What kind of gun do I have in this game?" my friend Trevor asks.

"You're NATO, so you get an M16," I tell him. I'm showing him *Operation Flashpoint*.

"An M16? No way, man. Those things jam too easy."

"No they don't. What are you talking about?"

We argue about whether M16s jam. Trevor sort of used to be in the Marines. He did some consulting work for them. Actually, he worked one summer for a company that was cleaning asbestos out of a former Marine recruiting building downtown. It was like being in the Marines in that they had to get up really early. I, on the other hand, have fired thousands of rounds from an M16—in *Operation Flashpoint*, at any rate—and I've never had a jam. Who are you going to believe?

> "You're lining up the perfect shot and then click, the guns lock up. You have to bang on an unjam key before you can fire again."

But then Trevor finds this on the game's setup screen: "The M16 is a reliable and accurate weapon (although prone to jamming, as it's relatively easy for dirt to get into the chamber and magazine)." This is nonsense. I must have crawled from one side of Everon to the other, on my belly, pushing my M16 on the ground in front of me. I've probably gotten enough dirt in there to use an M113 APC as a planter. But I've never had a jam.

I know fallible weapons. In the *Red Baron* flight sims, your guns could jam. You're lining up the perfect shot and then *click*, the guns lock up. You have to bang on an unjam key before you can fire again. In every submarine sim since *Silent Service*, some torpedoes have been duds. One of the racial traits in the science fiction strategy game *Stars!* was cheap engines, which meant whenever your ships traveled at speeds greater than warp six, there was a 10% chance they wouldn't work and you'd lose your movement for that turn. Those games were realistic. They knew faulty hardware. They demonstrated "the total depravity of inanimate things," a concept *Operation Flashpoint* only exhibits when you run into one of the scripting bugs in the single player campaign.

"I believe in the total depravity of inanimate things," Katharine Walker wrote in the Atlantic Monthly in 1864, which I believe predated even the gun jams in the first *Red Baron*, "the elusiveness of soap, the knottiness of strings, the transitory nature of buttons, the inclination of suspenders to twist and hooks to forsake their lawful eyes, and cleave only unto the hairs of their hapless owner's head."

Things are more interesting if they don't always work the way you want them to. An important aspect of personality is limitation. Perfection and infallibility are boring. Since weapons are really the lead characters in a first person shooter, they should have more of this kind of personality. I don't just mean the sort of inevitable deterioration you get in *Diablo* and *System Shock 2*, where equipment inevitably melts away like scoops of ice cream on a hot sidewalk. How about building reliability into weapon balance to move further beyond the paradigm of the slow fire/big damage shotgun vs. the fast fire/little damage minigun? How about embracing the total depravity of inanimate things, even if just a little bit?

"Hey, dude, check it out," Trevor says. He had alt-tabbed out of the game to bring up a Flash animation on www.gunnut.com of a diagram of an M16 with a cartridge jammed in the firing chamber, which he took a screenshot of and then loaded into *Photoshop* to print on my inkjet before alt-tabbing back into the game. Now the computer's locked up.

"I told you so," he says, repeatedly tapping the unresponsive keyboard, "My M16 jammed up hard." ●

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"…the Audigy performs magnificently across all game, music, and video media. It is without question the highest quality sound card available for the PC."

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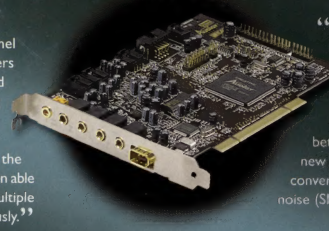

"…true 24-bit, 6-channel digital-to-analog converters (DACs) produced breathtaking sound and low noise levels, and the card was even able to record multiple analog inputs simultaneously."

ZDNet.com
Best Buy Award

ZDNet BEST BUY

"…the Audigy delivers cleaner sound and better environmental effects. The cleaner sound is the result of better mixing and a new 24-bit, 96 KHz digital to analog converter, which delivers a signal to noise (SNR) ratio of over 100 dB."

Computer Games
Editor's Choice Award

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

"These cards bring to market a host of new features, including more audio processing horsepower, a new iteration of Creative's EAX extensions for games, and perhaps most notably, FireWire."

— ExtremeTech

"The Audigy's 24-bit digital-to-analog and analog-to-digital converters simply produced better sound quality than that of all other consumer sound cards."

Maximum PC
Gear of the Year Award

GEAR OF THE YEAR MAXIMUM PC

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

"… Again, amazing. If you fancy yourself a fan of audio, make sure there's an Audigy in your next PC."

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